

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



127 357

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

•

»»»»

Gallant Fraud

»»»»

•

Gallant Fraud



by

ELIZABETH ALDEN HEATH



THE PENN PUBLISHING
COMPANY · PHILADELPHIA

•

TO
PAUL H. STORM
For shining fortitude

•



Gallant Fraud



I



AMOS BURNHAM stood watching the truck he had just helped load from the stoop of his grain and feed store rattle away down the village street and vanish over the brow of the hill in a cloud of sun-gilt dust. Once it was out of sight it came to him that not all the dust had gone with the truck. The street itself, the contented old houses just now luxuriating in a wealth of flowering June shrubbery, the spreading village green sentineled by that immaculate white Puritan, the First Congregational Church, even the backdrop of distant hills with Mount Tabor towering over them, were befogged to his eyes.

With a smothered exclamation of disgust Amos unhooked his spectacles from his large and furry ears and blew on the lenses.

"Darned nuisance," he remarked aloud. "Folks ain't got any business to grow old in sections. Ought to

Gallant Fraud

keep right on staying whole till they go to pieces all to once like the one horse shay." He blew again on the lenses and reached toward the hip pocket of his overalls whence he dragged a large and very limp handkerchief. His thickened fingers were clumsy at the delicate task of polishing and the results were none too successful. But Amos was not one to fret over such detail. He replaced the glasses astride his nose, blew the latter vigorously on the mussed handkerchief, stuffed the handkerchief by degrees back into his pocket, and took another comprehensive observation of the street preparatory to going into the store.

A few minutes before when he had viewed this scene the only signs of life had been nothing to arouse more than neighborly interest in anyone who, like Amos, had man and boy gazed upon the main street of East Joppa, Vermont, daily for nearly seventy years. To be sure it was something to remark that Sam Gibson had for a wonder got that lazy lout of a boy of his out mowing the lawn. Sam must have had a real set-to with Sarah again. She'd got her mind made up that the boy was delicate. Sarah never was very smart. Making a white elephant for Sam out of the great booby. There went Letty Blake wheeling her baby over to her

Gallant Fraud

ma's to spend the day. Didn't seem more than yesterday it had been Letty herself in the stroller, and a pretty little critter she'd been. And would you look at that! Something pretty interesting must be stirring in the village grapevine. Julia Scott and Almira Hill had their heads together over the line fence, and not more than half their washing hung up at this hour of a Monday morning.

But these were items so ordinary they were to be taken philosophically. What was different, and what quickened his blood and set up a warm glow above his midriff, was the immediate appearance of a small figure on a bicycle skimming swiftly along the sidewalk toward him.

To a stranger this might have seemed nothing more exciting than a fifteen-year-old boy, but even if he had not cleaned his spectacles Amos Burnham could have recognized at a much greater distance his granddaughter Rhoda. In less time than it takes to tell it, the bicycle, driven vigorously by slender legs in blue slacks, covered the intervening space and with a spatter of gravel came to a halt by the stoop just below where Amos was standing. One small foot in a gay sandal planted itself lightly but firmly on the worn tread of

Gallant Fraud

the lower step and a laughing face was tilted up to the old man.

"Hi-ya, Gramp!" said Rhoda Burnham.

"How be you, Rhody?" responded Gramp. "Mebbe you ain't heard it, but East Joppa's adopted a speed limit since you was here last. Better look out or Ike Jones'll have you into the jug."

Rhoda laughed at the time-worn joke. "Now you have got me worried," she said and swung off the machine, propping it with a swift and effective kick to the pedal.

The laugh was a delicious ripple, and the voice matched it, low-pitched and faintly husky with the globed sweetness of a thrush's call in the upper notes. Amos never heard it without thanking his lucky stars he wasn't deaf, but he wouldn't have admitted it any more than he would have allowed that she was the light of his eyes. No weakness of his was going to help turn the girl's head. There'd be plenty to pay her fool compliments without him. His chin grasped between horny thumb and forefinger, he appraised her now with what he fondly believed was a dourly inscrutable expression.

Rhoda flung herself down on the top step and

Gallant Fraud

leaned against the porch pillar, hands clasped around her knees, head thrown back, the creamy arch of her throat soft as a dove's above the beige silk of her sleeveless shirt. The wind of her going had tossed the long bob of brown hair bound back from her eyes by a crimson snood, and the sunlight caught in its waves where young gold would linger for some years to come. Out of amused brown-hazel eyes filled with dancing gold flecks, she gave back the old man's gaze.

"The old darling," she thought, "he's tickled pink to have me home, but he thinks he's got to register toughness just to keep me in order."

She grinned entrancingly, widening her generous red mouth and wrinkling a straight little nose dusted faintly by gold freckles. "Well, Amos, my lamb, what do you think of your only granddaughter now she's been exposed to a lot of expensive education? Do you think she's improved enough to pay you for the outlay?"

She had him, the little puss. He couldn't keep the twinkle out of his eyes any longer. His *humph* broke into a chuckle.

"You'll do," he said. "I guess the money wa'n't altogether wasted."

Gallant Fraud

Yet he fumbled about in his mind trying to explain in concrete terms the change this year in college had wrought in her. At eighteen she was no longer just the same little country girl she had been when she went away last fall. Not that she had lost any of the endearing qualities of that child; indeed they were not only still there but enhanced. He felt without analyzing the subtle smoothing away of awkward angles and the co-ordination of mental and physical charm that in these few months had made a woman out of a school girl. He was relieved, though, to find that as far as he was concerned, she was still a bit nearer to the school girl than to the woman. His real opinion was that she was as nearly perfect as any granddaughter needed to be.

So he said again, "Yeah, I guess you'll do, if you behave yourself as good as you look."

Rhoda grimaced comically, dropped her feet to a lower step and sat up, shaking back her hair. "And will you tell me," she inquired, "where in East Joppa I'm going to find anything to do but behave myself?"

She no sooner had the words come out than she drew a quick, repentant breath, remembering, as she knew her grandfather must, that people had found ways of not behaving even in these quiet surroundings.

Gallant Fraud

"I'm sorry, Gramp," she said contritely. "I'm a nasty little beast to say such a thing after you've been so swell about giving me this lovely year. I do love the old town, even when I grouse about it."

Amos had dragged forward a weatherbeaten chair and now he sat down on it heavily, his elbows on his knees, his big old hands hanging loosely clasped. His face was sober and he did not reply at once. Rhoda waited. She knew she had touched a sensitive spot—a spot that should have pained her, too, and would have if an outsider had prodded it. How could she have been so thoughtless and callous? Was this the sort of change being away from home made in you? Did you, without knowing what was happening, grow out of those close bonds of family life? Did you lose your sense of mutual responsibility in your increasing awareness of yourself as an individual? She moved herself along the step until her shoulder rested against her grandfather's knee and reached up to pat the clasped hands gently.

"Forget it, please, Gramp," she urged. "It's lovely to be home again with you. I'm going to have a grand summer, relaxing and reading and—looking out for things."

Amos picked a bit of string from his overalls and

Gallant Fraud

twiddled it between his fingers. "Dunno's I blame you for finding it a mite tame in the village after being with all them young folks," he said, as if he were quite unaware of her underlying meaning. "Boys and girls kind of hate to come back once they've got a taste of the outside, and it leaves the place pretty empty of young life. It don't seem to occur to 'em they could liven things up if they stayed, but who's to say they ain't in the right after all?"

Obviously he expected no answer and Rhoda, knowing none, did not make it.

He dropped the string and straightened his shoulders. "I kind o' hoped we might have some company for you this summer, but 'pears I was wrong."

Rhode shifted her position, looking up at him with quick suspicion. "What do you mean?" she asked a little sharply. "You haven't heard from Jimmie, have you?"

The old man shook his head. "Not exactly," he replied. "I wrote him on his birthday, like I always do, and I got back a card saying he was graduating from the university this month."

"And then I suppose you wrote again and asked him to come east?"

Gallant Fraud

Amos nodded.

"And as usual got no answer."

He nodded again.

"Amos Burnham," said Rhoda, "I have, as you know, a very great respect for your intelligence, but I regret to say it doesn't seem to click when it is applied to dear Cousin Jimmie. How many times have you asked him to visit you? I mean since he was old enough to come by himself."

"Quite a few," admitted Amos ruefully.

"And I wouldn't put it past you to have sent him his fare as well. Oh, I shouldn't have said that, Gramp. It's none of my business, and besides, there's no more reason why you shouldn't spend money on Jimmie than on Urson and me. He's just the same relation to you only—only he and his mother have been so nasty. The least they could do would be answer your letters decently."

"We mustn't be too hard on the boy," admonished Amos patiently. "He's likely just thoughtless and took up with his own interests. As for Emily, I don't suppose 'twas to be expected she'd have much sentiment about an old man who was only the father of one she was married to for a little while. Them war

Gallant Fraud

marriages was more'n half thrill and excitement, more's the pity. Mebbe if your uncle Frank hadn't been killed when his plane crashed and he and Emily had had a chance to settle down to some sort of life together, things would have been different. As 'tis, I dunno's it's to be wondered at if it all seems sort of unreal to her, 'specially when she married again right off and the new husband adopted the boy and all. Likely she would rather forget, the way she would a bad dream."

Rhoda had her share of the hardness of youth. "It's no use your making up excuses for her. You know she behaved badly to you. All she did was use you while the baby was coming. I don't believe she cared a snap of her finger for Uncle Frank or was bothered over his cracking up. She couldn't have cared or she'd not have married almost as soon as she knew he was dead. She acted like a selfish pig. The least she could have done was to let you have Jimmie here once in a while. Why, you haven't even seen him since he was six months old, have you?"

"No, but Wisconsin's considerable ways off, and this man Brown she married had his business there. After all it ain't every man would have done so well by a step-son, adopting him for his own and all."

Gallant Fraud

"I don't for a minute believe it was Mr. Brown who stood in the way. He hasn't for quite a while anyway, being conveniently dead. He left Emily and Jimmie scads of money, too, didn't he? They could very easily have come to see you if they'd wanted to. Even if they'd got to looking down on New England like a lot of easterners who have gone west to live, they could have invited you out there. The road runs in both directions. No, sir, it shows what they're like."

"I guess it ain't no use arguing," said Amos mildly. "I don't rightly know why I've gone on hoping something would happen, unless 'tis a man kind of hopes to be friends with his grandsons. Jimmie was a cute little tyke. I'd admire to see what he's grown up like."

His voice was wistful. "I ain't got even a picture of him," he added, "except that snapshot Emily sent the first Christmas after they went west."

Rhoda blinked a sympathetic mist from her eyes. "He hasn't absolutely said he wouldn't come this year, has he?" she asked on a softer key.

"No, there was nothing but a card with a picture of one of the university buildings onto it, and *J.B.*, 1939 wrote under it."

"That's more than he usually deigns to send," said

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda. "Maybe he'll come when he gets over commencement."

"Mebbe," agreed Amos with no conviction in his voice.

Rhoda was silent for a minute after which she asked, "How old is Jimmie, anyway?"

"Twenty-three."

"He's been pretty slow getting through college," she criticized. "He can't be very bright or something."

"Your pa's the scholar of the family," said Amos. "Frank never took to books. He was all for machines and would rather putter around one any day than learn his lessons. It wouldn't surprise me if Jim was like him."

"Perhaps, or else he may be specializing in football," suggested Rhoda tartly. "Well, let's forget the dear boy unless he surprises us by turning up. Isn't it grand Dad got that chance as a traveling tutor for the summer? It's just what he's needed to get him out of his rut, and he hasn't felt he could afford even two weeks off since Urson married."

Urson's name dropped between them as dully as a lump of clay. Neither of them tried to pick it up.

"Poor Gramp," thought Rhoda, "it does seem as if

Gallant Fraud

he might have had one grandson he could take pride in. It doesn't seem fair."

"Your pa's a good man," said Amos, as if he sensed her unvoiced comment, "and a real student. The town's lucky to have him for a minister."

"Yes," replied Rhoda, "Dad's what they used to call a gentleman and a scholar." Once that fact would have been enough to secure her pride in her father, she thought. Why wasn't it now? And why did she have to shut her eyes so deliberately to the knowledge that if John Burnham had not been so exclusively gentleman and scholar with so strong a strain of unworldly saint added, his son Urson might have benefited by more practical training?

There seemed to be no avoiding dangerous ground this morning. Fortunately at this moment diversion came panting down the street.

"Well, will you look who's here?" Rhoda welcomed it with considerable relief. "I was perfectly sure I had him safely tied up after I gave him his bath."

Amos looked and chuckled. "What the dickens do you call that?" he asked. "Acts like it was a dog, but it's the queerest specimen I ever laid eyes onto."

"Of course it's a dog."

Gallant Fraud

"Why didn't you tell me you wanted one and I'd of found you a real pup."

"I've got myself all I need. No, no, darling, don't tear me to pieces," to the little black creature that had hurled itself against her chest like a hand grenade, exploding into a shower of ear-splitting squeals and barks. "There, there, Rhoda isn't going to desert you. You see, Gramp, he's terrified at being lost again. Ben Lothrop picked him up on the road where some brutes had thrown him out of a car to get rid of him. Ben was going to drown him, but I rescued him."

"Well, he may be pretty good as a refugee, but I wouldn't want to underwrite him as a dog. Strikes me he must of had an inventor or two up his family tree, or else this here Herr Goering had a hand in fixing him up."

Rhoda crowed delightedly. "Gramp, you've done it."

"Done it?" queried Amos, scratching his head. "What have I done now?"

"Named him, of course. I was trying to think of something distinctive on account of his being such an unusual dog, and I couldn't. But you've hit it the first crack."

Gallant Fraud

"Goering?" inquired Amos. "Seems to me he'll have to put on a mite of flesh to have it fit, not to mention it's not being real easy to say."

"No, no, not Goering. Ersatz, of course. Satz for short. Oh, beautiful, don't roll in the dust after all the trouble I had cleaning you up."

"Beautiful!" snorted Amos. "For the land sakes ——"

"Oh, well, perhaps he isn't beautiful, but you'll have to admit he's a cute pet, like John L. Lewis with those lovely eyebrows."

"I give up," said Amos grinning at the dog who lay foolishly on his back gazing sentimentally at his new mistress. "I've heard quite a few things about John L., but cute pet is a new one."

Rhoda's laugh rippled again. "Set it down to the broadening effect of education. And now I must be getting along back to the house. What I came over for, incidental to visiting with the very nicest grandfather ever, was to find out if I might borrow your car this afternoon."

"I might of known you had some axe to grind," said Amos trying hard to be grim again.

"No use pretending you aren't willing, darling. I'll

Gallant Fraud

bet you've had the bus shined up just in case I wanted it. Shall I come get it, or will you bring it over?"

"You'll come," said Amos. "I might as well have something to pay for the wear and tear."

"How about starting with a down payment?" chuckled Rhoda, giving him a swift hug and a light kiss on the tip of his big nose. "Come on, Satz. Look, isn't he smart? He knows his name already."

In another second, she was skimming down the street again, hair flying, and Ersatz plugging valiantly behind her on his stubby, nondescript legs.

Amos Burnham remained standing where she left him. In his immobility he might have been posing for a symbolic figure of old New England. An artist would have seen in him all the elements he shared with his environment. The sturdy resistance to change like the granite of Mount Tabor, worn and seamed by rain, wind and frost, altering inevitably with time, but slowly and from the surface, keeping its integrity at heart; the strong, living power that all earthy growth draws from inner richness, that can defy gravity itself, and can lie patiently waiting through long white winters for which the summer's thrift has prepared it; the contentment with competency rather

Gallant Fraud

than affluence—that self-contained independence of an older America.

But Amos Burnham did not think of himself as a symbol. He was merely a family man with a bewildering problem, to which the puzzlement of the hen with a brood of ducklings was simple indeed. Without human meddling any moral Rhode Island Red will placidly hatch out a dozen little Rhode Island Reds, and every clear-eyed Early Rose potato, given half a chance, will beget a hill of hearty Early Roses. Why then had he, plain, common sense Amos Burnham, hard-headed Vermonter, and his normal, well-balanced Martha, produced such diverse offspring as the restless Frank who found fulfilment only in flying and to whom war was a glorious adventure and love an accompanying episode, and John with his frail body and student's brain, who neither craved nor accepted any adventure outside his books? How, in turn, had John become the father of vital, energetic Rhoda, and the handsome, unambitious weakling Urson? Maybe some time the scientists would find out an explanation.

Meantime Amos couldn't help wondering what Frank's son was like. Perhaps he ought not to cling to

Gallant Fraud

the hope of seeing him. There was Rhoda to be proud of. Urson seemed to have been more settled of late too. But Jim— Oh, well!

With a sigh of resignation he turned and went slowly back into the store.

2



RHODA put her bicycle away in the woodshed and tied Ersatz up again, this time more scientifically, under the apple tree in the back yard.

"Now no fooling," she warned him, "you've got to be a good dog and stay right here."

Ersatz slopped down a hearty drink from his water dish. His attitude was not reassuring, so she went on. "Until you have a license and a collar with my name on it, I suppose you're likely to get both of us into trouble. I'd better take you to Bennetsville with me this afternoon and fit you to something you can't wiggle out of. I hope Gramp won't fuss about the upholstery in his car. I'd better take a blanket for you in case.

"Keep tabs on the pup for a few minutes, will you, Miranda, and call me if he works himself loose," she said as she entered the kitchen where a lean, melan-

Gallant Fraud

choly visaged middle-aged woman was preparing vegetables at the sink.

Miranda Perkins sniffed lugubriously and stood gazing mournfully down at a very large, very bald potato from which she had just snipped the last bit of peel. Her lips moved dryly over each other, but no words developed.

“‘Alas, poor Yorick,’” intoned Rhoda gleefully.

Miranda’s lack-luster eyes lighted with macabre fire, and her voice flowed out unimpeded. “Sakes alive, you don’t say! Don’t tell me Grandpa York has passed away without no more warnin’ than this! My, my, won’t that mean a terrible great funeral? Why, he’s got ten livin’ children and nobody knows how many grands, not to mention all the cousins and more distant kin and in-laws. They’ll have to have it in the church for the house won’t hold ’em. Ain’t it just what would happen with your pa away and nobody out a supply to hold the services? Almiry’ll have her hands full feedin’ all that crowd if everybody comes as they likely will. I’d better look up some preserves to take over and bake off a couple of pies and a layer cake.”

“Hy-yi!” interrupted Rhoda at last. “I hate to dis-

Gallant Fraud

appoint you, but the funeral I spoke of was all over four or five hundred years ago. You can save your pies unless you want Grandpa York to eat them himself. As far as I know he's still able to appreciate them."

"Then what do you want to get a body all het up for by sayin' he's dead?" snapped Miranda.

"I didn't," said Rhoda. "I was only repeating something I read in a book. I'm sorry."

"Books!" snorted Miranda. "Pesky dust catchers! Ain't you had enough of 'em at that highfalutin' college o' yours to last you a spell? If you ain't you can take a brush to your pa's. I aim to give his room one good thorough doin' down for once while he's off to Alaska this summer. He won't let me touch it while he's around and you can't hardly wade through the mess. There's plenty other places in the house I could mention that's worse yet, but them that makes their dirt can clean up after themselves. Not that they will, judgin' from what's past. I ain't one to complain as you well know, but when it comes to doin' my own work and waitin' onto them as is as able bodied as me, not to say younger, I declare if it ain't more'n human nater'll stand."

Gallant Fraud

"Aw, Randy!" said Rhoda, giving the angular shoulders a quick hug, "who's afraid of the big bad wolf? I'll help you clean the whole house if you want me to. I'm just rarin' to scrub. I'll bet we can dig up stuff Dad's forgotten he ever owned. But we aren't going to begin today. I'm going over to Bennetsville this afternoon. Anything I can get for you?"

Miranda, she knew, always did want something East Joppa's limited shopping facilities did not afford, and the making of a list would divert her mind, temporarily at least, from her chronic woe. Not that there was much danger that any woe, chronic or otherwise, would succeed in driving Mrs. Perkins out of the parsonage kitchen. In fact, Rhoda suspected the crotchety lady of cherishing "some folks' shiftless ways" much as a hypochondriac coddles his indigestion. Moreover, she realized Miranda's outbursts were all a part of the self-respecting Vermonter's normal stand for constitutional privileges, and however strong and undiplomatic the vinegar with which the charges were served up, they were merely a revoicing of the Bill of Rights with special reference to freedom of speech.

Above and beyond all this, the girl was not without

Gallant Fraud

a very real, if repressed, sympathy for her father's old housekeeper. Things had been anything but easy for everybody in the family since Urson's hasty marriage two years before. Essie, the pretty, fluffy-headed young creature who had dropped into the quiet life of the parsonage with as disturbing an effect as a whole squad of enemy parachute jumpers behind the line, and with far less chance of controlling the damage to the general morale, had complicated matters for everyone, and not the least for Miranda. Essie was at the current moment as sturdy and sound as the little old Morgan in Amos Burnham's barn, but whatever she lacked in actual intelligence, she had craft enough to capitalize her situation. She had traded first on her physical weakness and later after the death of her baby on the natural decency and considerateness of her husband's people. Before anyone else knew it Essie had settled securely into a state of being permanently waited on, regardless of her complete ability to become very active when anything she wanted to do appeared in the offing.

Essie openly and avowedly loathed housework though she had a gift for leaving a devastating trail of it in her wake. It was no great wonder that Miranda,

Gallant Fraud

to whom disorder was six of the seven deadly sins, and on whom fecklessness had as depressing an effect as moral depravity, should have found the last two years anything but happy. Nor had it been happy for the rest of them, though they said less about it, even among themselves. But they had not forgotten the humiliation in which it had originated, although the village with the curious and seldom realized tolerance of the small New England community, had after the usual nine days' buzz of gossip let the rain and the sun of passing weeks fade its scarlet out to a little regarded pink. The fading would have happened in any case, but it probably happened a trifle more quickly because East Joppa was always likely to stand solidly behind Amos Burnham and his son John.

John Burnham had been pastor of the First Congregational Church ever since his graduation from the theological school. There had never been any question about John's choice of a profession. He had been born with the temperament of a country parson, which, combined with his intense devotion to scholarship, had inevitably produced a vocation. Luckily for him the charge at East Joppa had fallen vacant exactly when he needed it, for John was very badly equipped for

Gallant Fraud

selling himself to strange church committees. But East Joppa had known him from boyhood, had known his father and mother before him. To be the son of Amos and Martha Burnham was recommendation enough in itself. The parish called him unanimously and never regretted the move. In spite of his tendency to give all his spare hours to pursuits in which the laity had little interest, John proved himself a conscientious pastor. His sermons, too, remained surprisingly simple and direct. His people came to love him in his own right, not because he was a Burnham. It was because they loved him that they pitied him rather than blamed him for Urson.

John married a girl he had met while he was in college. She died when Rhoda was ten years old and Urson fourteen, and of the same epidemic of influenza which took Martha Burnham a week later. John had been nearly prostrated by the double blow. He turned more and more to his books as a medium of escape from his grief—unfortunately for his children's sake. Rhoda suffered less from his neglect than Urson. She had always been devoted to her grandfather, now she was with him almost constantly, and he, missing Martha, made a companion of the small girl. He would

Gallant Fraud

have done as much for Urson if the boy had let him, but Urson was at an age when criticism of his elders and escape from their tutelage was a mark of adolescent smartness. He did, indeed, cannily keep on the best of terms with Amos outwardly, for the resources of the grain business were far greater than those of the minister's salary. But while he accepted the old man's kindly advances with a certain show of respect, he inwardly scorned his grandfather's advice as old-fashioned and stodgy, keeping his tongue in his cheek while he listened to it.

Urson was not stupid. He might easily have done very well at school if he hadn't been lazy, as it was he finished the Bennetsville Academy at eighteen. However, he failed to pass his college board examinations because he had refused to buckle down to intensive preparation, and much to his father's belated regret, had to fall back on the state university. Awake at last to the boy's shortcomings, John hoped Urson might find himself and do well enough in the smaller college to warrant a transfer to a larger one. But this hope was dashed at midyears when he was sent home because of his poor standing. For once John asserted himself vigorously. He was determined Urson should have a col-

Gallant Fraud

lege degree. Urson was quick enough to see the advantage of playing up to his father. He fostered in him a belief that this failure was due largely to his own disappointment in not being admitted to Harvard. John determined to tutor the boy and to show the board of examiners they had misjudged his son's ability. As a matter of fact, Urson had exactly the kind of brain that once it opens itself, responds to stuffing like a goose being fattened for *pâté de fois gras*. John was delighted with his results, and grew more and more resentful at the lack of appreciation from examiners and faculties. While his father was in this mood, Urson found it increasingly easy to do enough to satisfy him in a few hours a day. This gave him plenty of leisure time in which to amuse himself, nor was it difficult to extract money from John while he was in this melting frame of mind. East Joppa was not, of course, replete with thrills for a young man who considered himself very modern and sophisticated, but Bennetsville, a town of considerable size, was only ten miles away. Also with the coming of spring various amusement spots opened along the state highways and catered to a class of entertainment seekers Urson found very congenial. John disliked motoring and never used the car

Gallant Fraud

except when he had to get somewhere quickly. Rhoda, of course, was too young to drive, so Urson had the old sedan pretty much to himself. He wasn't particularly proud to be seen in it, but as he remarked to his friends, it got him there and it got him back. It took him increasingly far afield.

Once or twice Amos, whose ear was nearly always pretty close to the ground, heard unhappy rumblings. He tried to warn John, but John was so much pleased with Urson's growing scholarship that he refused to listen. The boy, he maintained, was applying himself splendidly. It was only natural for him to need a certain amount of recreation, and Amos must remember young people were different since the war. They required more excitement. The old standards had changed entirely. He assured Amos that he had spoken to Urson after the first hint had come to him, and Urson had insisted there was nothing to the story of his having been in a certain wild party. Surely Amos could take his own grandson's word. Amos did not feel too sure he could, but he saw it was useless to press the matter further.

Not until early September, when John had already made arrangements for Urson to take his examinations,

Gallant Fraud

had the blow fallen. East Joppa had but one code to cover such circumstances and both John and Amos had been bred to that code. So Urson married Essie, whose parents had been running a none too savory dine and dance resort on the North Road that summer, and brought her home to live in the parsonage.

Essie found it all unspeakably boring. She hadn't known much about Urson except that he was handsome, danced well and made love quite marvelously. He always seemed to have plenty of money, and her father had heard that old man Burnham was likely to leave his only grandson a nice little package. She hadn't been nearly as frightened and innocent as she had appeared in those early weeks, but she had soon found to her disgust that she was likely to have a very dull time in East Joppa. John Burnham now acknowledged his father had been right, and was very humbly taking the latter's advice. Urson having married would have to settle down to supporting his family. Amos exerted his influence and got the young man a position in the Bennetsville bank, and both those horrible old men, as Essie thought of them, insisted that nearly all Urson's meagre salary should be contributed to the household. There was nothing Essie could do about it,

Gallant Fraud

nothing, that is, except to let them know very definitely that she didn't intend to raise a finger. Urson paid, and somebody else could do the work.

Rhoda had been at an impressionable age when all this happened, and although Amos had done his best to shield her and had insisted she should go to college at his expense when the already over-burdened John could no longer manage to send her, she was only too well aware of the wreck of her once peaceful and happy home. She knew, none better, how much of anything that remained of orderly living depended on Miranda Perkins, and she appreciated the woman accordingly. She did not blame her for her outbursts, merely doing what she could to divert them.

"Listen, Randy," she said now, as she jotted down the last memorandum the housekeeper gave her, "do you suppose you could knit me a new pullover to go with my blue suit? My fountain pen leaked on the old one and it's a sight."

She could have chosen no better bait to catch Miranda's interest, for knitting was her only hobby. Once they were upon the needles, her big bony hands became miraculously skillful instruments, and of this she was intensely proud. Rhoda's wardrobe had bene-

Gallant Fraud

fited by this craft all through her childhood, and at college her soft wool ensembles and sports wear had been the envy of her less fortunate associates.

"Uhuh," said Miranda with pleased alacrity. "You git the yarn this afternoon and I'll set right to work on it. Mebbe I can clean the old one, too."

"There's no great hurry about either," said Rhoda. "With the warm weather coming along I'll probably want thinner things. Well, I must go change. I want to start as soon as dinner's over. I'm going to meet Gerry Faulkner after my errands are done," she chattered on, "and hear about her summer plans. Isn't she the lucky thing? Her aunt's taking her to Old Orchard for the whole season."

"Humph," grunted Mrs. Perkins, "I should say she was. It's a pity you couldn't git to go somewheres like that yourself. This house ain't no fit place for you no more."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. I know it's different, but after all, it's home. Besides, with Dad away, somebody's got to stick around and see you don't embezzle the housekeeping funds, darling."

"There ain't likely to be much to embezzle," said Miranda grimly.

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda looked startled. She knew her father was quite capable of some bad lapse into absentmindedness. "Didn't Dad leave you enough?" she asked.

"Yeah, he left his part," said Miranda, "but if Urson don't hand over what he owes it ain't going to last through. He ain't paid me a red cent since your pa left, and he gits mad every time I say anything to him about it."

Rhoda flushed. "He can't do that. I'll speak to him myself," she said.

"Much good it'll do you," croaked Miranda. "I don't mind goin' without my own wages, you understand, but what I ain't goin' to do is to run up no grocery bills. So if him and her majesty finds themselves on short commons there'll be nobody to blame but Mr. Urson."

"I'm sure it will be all right," soothed Rhoda. "Probably he's had some extra expenses or something. Well, I'll run along upstairs. Don't be worried if I'm late getting back this afternoon."

Her tone was lighter than her heart. The happy mood of the earlier morning had lost much of its shine. What a disagreeable way petty embarrassments had of sticking pins in one's buoyancy. Gramp was disap-

Gallant Fraud

pointed about Jimmie, but what could she do about it? And now here was this housekeeping jam. It wasn't her responsibility. Or was it? The church had been generous to vote her father his salary during the months of his absence. Of course it was no more than he deserved, for he'd hardly ever taken a real vacation in all the years of his tenure. If he didn't run into too many extra expenses, he might come home with something saved from his tutoring fees and be that much ahead. Even so money was not plentiful at the parsonage, and Urson knew it as well as she. It was unfair for him to take advantage of Miranda when Dad's back was turned. It wasn't hard to figure out what was on Urson's mind. He thought Gramp ought to step in and help out. She hadn't forgotten how disagreeable he had been over Gramp's sending her to college. He chose not to remember Amos had paid Essie's hospital bills and a number of other debts as well. But Gramp was right about Urson. He must learn to stand on his own feet and he never would as long as somebody kept coming to his rescue. Even Dad, impractical as he was, had insisted on that, and now, the minute Dad was away, Urson was up to his old tricks. She supposed she would have to speak to him about it, but how she did

Gallant Fraud

dread the inevitable scene! Urson had always known how to reduce her to a quivering pulp. Perhaps she could make an approach through Essie.

The door to the big front room, once her mother's, was partly open, and through it she could see the tumbled bed with Essie in a not too immaculate peach negligee propped against the pillows reading a gaudy covered movie magazine. She was moved to reluctant admiration as she always was when she looked at her brother's wife. Essie was so very, very pretty even when she wasn't trying to be.

"Hello, Essie," she called pleasantly.

The girl on the bed rolled over lazily and yawned, stretching like a beautiful kitten. "Oh, hello, kid," she replied. "What time is it?"

"About eleven," said Rhoda, "and a perfectly gorgeous morning. You're missing a lot by not being out."

"I'm not missing a thing I crave, thank you. Why anybody wants to start thrashing around at the crack of dawn is more than I can see. But then," she hastened to record her perennial and by this time practically mechanical complaint, "it's different, I suppose, for rugged people like you. You probably slept like a pig all night, while I never closed my eyes till morning."

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda did not comment on this, but stepped into the room. In spite of the partly open window the place was fussy with the smell of coarse perfume staling on unwashed lingerie, cigarette smoke involved with heavy talc powder—a dense, sensual atmosphere that vaguely irritated more than her lungs. Her eyes, too, were offended by the general disorder. She could remember only too well how sweet and gracious this room had been in her mother's time, and how coming into it had made one feel calm and clean inside.

Essie seemed to sense something of her sister-in-law's thought from her silence, for she said half apologetically, half defiantly, "This place is an awful mess, but old sour puss makes such a fuss every time I tell her to clean it up I don't bother very often."

"Couldn't you tidy it yourself?" suggested Rhoda mildly.

"Why should I? She's paid to do it, and paid a lot more than she's worth, if you ask me."

"I clean my room."

"That's entirely different. When you come back here you make extra work, so you ought to help out. Besides, you're strong as a young ox. You don't know what it is to be delicate like I am." She lit a cigarette

Gallant Fraud

and inhaled placidly. "Hand me that bottle of nail enamel on the dresser, will you? Not there? Oh, here it is right within reach. If it had been a bear it would have bitten me."

She picked the bottle from a collection of oddments on the bedside table. Its loosely screwed top fell off and a trickle of crimson spread over the sheet. "Damn," she said, "I hope there's enough left for a job. Listen, kid, call up Urson, will you, and tell him to get me another bottle before he comes home? He knows the kind. And while you're about it, remind him about my blue dance frock at the cleaner's. He might forget, and I want it for this evening. We're stepping out."

Rhoda braced herself against the footboard of the bed. She'd have to get this over quickly or not at all. "Essie," she began, "I've got something to say to you and you must take it right. Miranda says Urson hasn't given her any money for two weeks."

"She would," said Essie, "and of course you would listen to servants' talk."

"Miranda's a housekeeper, not a servant, and she's been with us since Urson and I were children. There's no reason why she shouldn't have spoken about the

Gallant Fraud

money. Oh, Essie, won't you try to help? I don't want to go to Urson about it. Won't you suggest he ought to pay his part when it's due?"

Essie blew on a brilliant fingertip and held her hand off to admire it. "I see no reason why I should," she answered. "Your father's gone off on a swell binge, and you've been having fun for a year past without it's costing you a cent. It's about time Urson and I had our turn getting ourselves amused. As for the house, you know very well it would go on running if we weren't here. Why should Urson have to put money into it when you don't? Why should you expect to come home for the summer and sponge on us?"

Rhoda's hazel eyes were almost black and her face blanched, but she kept her voice steady. "I'm sorry you feel that way about my being here," she said.

"Yes, too bad, isn't it," said Essie, "but that's exactly how I do, so what?" Oddly there was nothing ill-natured in her tone. Indeed, Essie was merely stating the case as she saw it, and as Rhoda now understood, Urson did as well. Hurt though she was, Rhoda knew, too, that Essie did not dislike her personally. Essie never bothered to dislike anything or anybody unless they interfered with her comfort. It was too much

Gallant Fraud

trouble. And now that she had given Rhoda distinctly to understand she wouldn't be allowed to interfere, Rhoda became as negligible a consideration as the bluebottle bumbling outside the screen. Essie's mind had already skated completely away from the conversation and was intent on her plans for the evening. "Don't forget to tell Urson about that dress," she prompted.

"No," said Rhoda woodenly. She knew better than to let Essie know she was going to Bennetsville herself that afternoon. She couldn't have her along when she met Gerry, and besides that, if Essie knew Gramp was lending his car, there would be a long tirade about unjust discrimination. Essie had completely forgotten she had crumpled a fender and smashed a headlight the last time Gramp had let her take it.

Rhoda went down the hall to her own room feeling very small and flattened out. Home for the summer! The phrase had sounded absolutely glamorous when the girls were almost singing it around the campus. Now it seemed to have come pretty badly unstuck and a lot of the pieces seemed to be missing. Still, there were a lot of parts not even Essie could destroy, the parts that made it home in spite of everything.

Gallant Fraud

There was the old village with its kindly people, there was crabbed Miranda who wasn't crabbed at all when you understood her, and Gramp who was a whole homeplace in himself. As for the summer, no selfish human could affect it, or begrudge her the sunlight on the hills, the warm breeze in the elmtops, the fragrance of flowers, the bird chorus at dawn, and all the thousand lovely things that made up summer in the country.

"So snap out of it, my girl," she admonished herself. "Wash your face and put a smile on it. How do you know something grand won't happen before sundown?"

3



PETER HAMILTON was glad to be back in New England. Not that he did not love his native Wisconsin. In fact, he had never for a moment considered taking up permanent residence in any other state. He owed it much. The controlling interest in the Hamilton paper mills which furnished the more than ample income he drew from his father's estate would be his one of these days when Uncle Henry retired from active management. Bachelor Uncle Henry made no secret that he looked upon Peter as upon a son and a successor. Peter had known ever since he was old enough to understand what the mills meant that he would go into the Hamilton office to learn the business as soon as he was through school and college. Now, a year after his graduation from Dartmouth, he already felt himself settling to his career. To be sure, his position to date had been more or less

Gallant Fraud

nominal, but it had given him opportunity to make himself familiar with much that lay before him.

Uncle Henry had said to him a few days after commencement, "I don't propose to be a slave driver, my boy. You are still pretty young and it is natural you should feel reluctant to get yourself tied down. In normal times I'd have encouraged you to take this year for travel, but travel isn't all it's cracked up to be right now. I suppose there are still places you can go without getting into an international jam, and if they interest you, by all means have a whack at them. On the other hand, if you want to come in and see how we do things, without any assigned position and making your own hours until you have a fairly comprehensive idea of the layout, I'll be very glad indeed to make the arrangement a practical one."

Peter had taken time enough to weigh this proposition, but he had never really felt in doubt about his ultimate decision. He was twenty-two, and sound of mind and muscle. Although no Adonis, he had an average supply of good looks, and rather more than an average amount of those wholesome masculine points that make a man attractive not only to women but to other men. He had not taken honors at college, but

Gallant Fraud

he had placed well up in the top third, and might easily have done better but for the break in his sophomore year caused by his father's death and the consequent heady effect of finding himself master of more money than he at first knew what to do with. If Peter had been a little dizzy at first, he had, on the whole, oriented himself more quickly than any one would have expected, except Uncle Henry, of course, whose capacity for expecting was unlimited where Peter was concerned. Of this capacity Peter had been kept in wholesome ignorance, for Henry Hamilton and his late brother were New England born and educated. If in the many years since their migration to the middle west they had lost some of their down east accent, they had kept the quality of emotional reticence bred in their New Hampshire stock.

So nobody preached at Peter and presently he got his feet back onto the solid ground and kept them there. Not that he didn't have his fling. He continued to have it now that college was well behind him, for at twenty-three youth still effervesces plentifully, but he had discovered that play is more fun when it is neatly balanced with work. He had also found in this year under his uncle's guidance, while he acted, as it

Gallant Fraud

amused him to say, as a sort of executive without portfolio, that the Hamilton mills were much more to him than a mere cash register. He was now ready to put his back into the business in no dilettante fashion.

It was more Uncle Henry's idea than his own, though he could not claim he wasn't pleased with the plan, that he should wait until autumn before taking up his regular duties.

"Take the summer off," said the older man. "There's no rush about your starting in. We did very well for a good many years before you were even thought of, you know," he added with a twinkle. "Naturally we expect a boom now we have you, but there seems to be a prejudice against booms in administrative circles. So go have a vacation, then you won't be asking for one before we get you well broken in."

"In other words," grinned Peter, "I'm to start my job with my day off. Does my salary begin, too?"

"We'll talk salary when we decide what you're worth," said his uncle. "Have you any plans afoot for the next few months?"

"Well," reflected Peter, "Kay's been in my hair for some time to get me to go east. She's buzzed poor old Fenton into buying her that cottage they rented on

Gallant Fraud

the Maine coast last year. It's a nice little place, at that."

"It would be if Kay considered it worth going after," replied Uncle Henry grimly. "That twin sister of yours has got as good an eye to values as any man. She'd have been a financial wizard if she hadn't been born a darned pretty woman with the craft of a female Machiavelli. What's she up to, Pete? Even money she's got some ulterior motive for wanting to get her hands on you."

Peter laughed with a touch of embarrassment. "You win," he said. "I only hope she doesn't, but you know how it is. Kay always called herself my better three-quarters. A mere man is at a disadvantage with her, especially when he's an unidentical twin."

"Humph, I suppose she wants to marry you off."

"You wouldn't doubt a cactus had spines, would you?"

"Well, don't get stuck. Not unless you like the girl she's picked. But have you decided to accept this urgent invitation to Maine?"

"I might."

"You might do worse, as long as you keep your eyes open. I've always hoped I'd get back to New Hamp-

Gallant Fraud

shire myself, but when a time actually comes that I could, I generally take it out in thinking. Still, once a New Englander, always a New Englander at heart, I guess. It's in your blood, too."

Peter nodded. "I loved Hanover and felt perfectly at home there. I fancy I could transplant pretty easily."

"That's a thought. We might put you in charge of our eastern factory, once we get the plant established," mused Mr. Hamilton. "Speaking of that, you might as well do a little business for us while you're in that section."

"By way of making me earn that vacation salary?" smiled Peter.

"Ummm. No, seriously. You'd do better than any scout we might send on to find out what's holding up the works. As you know, of the available factory sites, our engineer, Hunt, reported most favorably on the one at East Joppa, Vermont. The old company that operated there for a number of years closed down when the 1936 flood carried the dam out. Most of the stock in that company is owned by a family named Barrows who also hold all the land along the right bank of the river from the place where the old dam

Gallant Fraud

went out to the proposed site of the new factory. Old man Barrows died last year and his heirs are anxious to sell out and get the estate settled. It looked at one time as if we had the deal all sewed up."

"Then what's the trouble?"

"Hanged if I know. New England's been squealing like a stuck pig because the factories are moving out of it. You'd think a place like East Joppa, which has no visible industry, would be keen on having a live business move in. But no, they're dead set against it, or at least somebody who can throw a mean monkey wrench is."

"But if the Barrows heirs have a stock control ——"

"That's where the hitch comes. They own exactly forty-nine percent, and they counted on getting hold of enough more without any trouble before anybody got wind of what was going on."

"And somebody got wind?"

"Somebody must have had a nose like a fox, for by the time the Barrows representative started his build-up, every share available had been mopped up. He couldn't lay hands on as much as a single proxy."

Peter whistled. "Any idea who this smart financier is?"

Gallant Fraud

"An old duck by the name of Amos Burnham," replied Mr. Hamilton. "He'll agree to a sale, but only on condition we rebuild the original dam. The site Hunt selected is five miles down river and would be a much less expensive proposition, not to mention its proximity to the railroad. Burnham's in possession of another forty-nine percent of the stock."

"That still leaves two percent to be accounted for. Who holds that? It looks as if he were the key to the situation."

"Some half cracked old woman, who can't or won't understand what it's all about. Burnham seems to have failed in that quarter quite as flatly as the Barrows agent."

"Hummm," mused Peter. "Why do you suppose Burnham is so set on the old location for the dam? Is any of his property due to be flooded?"

"No. Hunt reported only some relatively unproductive farm lands would be affected. The owners would probably jump at the chance of the indemnity money."

"Screwy, isn't it?"

"Decidedly. Of course we can take up one of the other available locations, but East Joppa sounded the

Gallant Fraud

best bet. Now my idea is this. We'll reserve decision until you can make an unofficial observation. As long as you will be in New England anyway, drop around in that vicinity. Keep your reason for being in the village dark so as not to arouse prejudice. If possible contact this Burnham and the old lady. Find out what the trouble is and then use your personality. I don't need to tell you what I mean."

"Putting it up to me, aren't you? How long do you think even the Man in the Iron Mask could stay incog in a village as small as this East Joppa sounds?"

"It's for you to find out and then do him one better. Seriously, I am very glad this has happened as it has, for there is no one I'd be more willing to trust than you. I won't attempt to dictate your method of procedure. Let it depend somewhat on circumstances as you find them. They may give you precisely the right opening."

Peter shook his head doubtfully. "All I can say is that I'll give it my best," he said, "but somehow I don't share your optimism, especially in respect to winning the hearts of the opposition. They sound a hard headed lot. I may be able to find out what's at the bottom of this recalcitrance, however."

Gallant Fraud

"That will be something," replied his uncle. "The reason may be valid though the Barrows agent insists it isn't. I admit there is something about him I don't altogether trust. Still, I don't propose to let us in for the expenditure of a number of extra thousands on account of the whim of a couple of East Jopparites."

"Certainly not. Will it be all right if I stop there on my way back? Are you in a hurry for the report?"

"Quite all right. The thing has hung fire so long it can do no harm hanging a bit longer. We couldn't get the job under way before next spring anyway. Don't let this commission mar your vacation, either. Give my love to Kay and little Peter. Good-bye and good luck to you."

That had been nearly a week ago, and now here he was, threading the twisting highways of a state which any good Vermonter will tell you pridefully would be the largest in the union if it could be ironed flat. Peter was glad the hills were eternal. He loved the way their emerald folds lifted against the June sky with cloud shadows playing over them vibrant chords in a symphony of green so intense it was no wonder even the practical minded pioneers had associated place and color by a name. He liked, too, the coziness

Gallant Fraud

of shortened distances between towns and villages, the friendly certainty that one was never far from human life, and that from the next hilltop another peacefully drowsing hamlet would be seen sunning by the valley road. Indeed, though he was still many miles from the spot where his own New England forbears had farmed their original acres, he was feeling curious stirrings of an instinct for the land which had bred, sustained and received back into itself so many lives of which his own was a mere continuity between past and future.

But this feeling he did not name to himself, nor did he attempt to figure why he was pleased to be back in New England. In a very healthy and extrovertal fashion he was simply glad. He was also hungry. He had not stopped for lunch at that attractive place which had loomed up a full half hour too early to interest him, and which as so often perversely happens, had been the last in which he felt hungry enough to eat. A glance at his mileage showed him that a change of oil was indicated, as well. If there should be a town of any size near, he reflected, it would be better to push on, leave the car at a service station and pick up a meal at a restaurant, instead of taking chances on wayside lunchrooms. He stopped the car and got out his road map.

Gallant Fraud

And right then he made what at first sight was an annoying discovery. Somewhere, just how many miles back he could not be certain, he must have made a wrong turn. The mistake was not devastating, for apparently the route he was on was an alternate, but it was less direct and would, if he held to it, take him farther north than the other. Studying it, however, he saw something that pleased him better. With no great trouble he could detour through Hanover. College was closed by this time, but not everybody would be gone. The fraternity house might still be available for lodging, if not he could put up in the town. He could put in a very agreeable evening. The faculty was never in as much of a hurry as the undergraduates to get away, and Peter was a still recent enough alumnus to be imbued with warm affection for his former taskmasters. It would be swell, he considered, to see some of the old boys again.

But Hanover was still far to seek, and meantime he had to eat and get the car lubricated. The nearest town of any size seemed to be a place called Bennetsville. It looked from the way the roads converged into it, like one of those shopping centers for the surrounding farm country. He looked again at the tiny network and nearly jumped out of his skin.

Gallant Fraud

"By Jove!" he exclaimed aloud, "I must be seeing things. Or is it that Uncle Henry has evoked some benign leadership for me? How else would I lose my way at a crossroads leading to East Joppa?"

For East Joppa the map said and no doubt about it. There could scarcely be two places of that name in the same state.

"Well, they can tell me more about it in Bennetsville," he thought, stepping on the accelerator, "and as long as I'm right here I may as well do my stuff and get it over with."

Rhoda was enjoying her drive to Bennetsville. Once she had deliberately shaken off the shadow of Essie and Urson, her spirits, always more or less resilient, rose with every mile she left behind her. It was fun to drive a car again, and Gramp's cars were always good. Gramp was cute—as cute as a rabbit. To see him you'd think he was nothing but a stodgy country storekeeper, but Rhoda hadn't been his shadow all these years without suspecting that if there was anything going on in the valley he didn't have his finger in, you'd have to hunt hard to find it. He had influence beyond the county limits, too, unless she was much

Gallant Fraud

mistaken, but he didn't talk about it. He wasn't as behind the times as he liked to make out, either. He drove around the village with old Maggie hitched to that museum piece of a buggy, but you'd never catch him keeping the same car more than two years, pretend though he might that he preferred a horse. This Buick wasn't much more than broken in.

The road ran very near the river where brown water swirled around tumbled rocks. In the spring it would foam and seethe into a dangerous rapid, sometimes overflowing and making the road impassable. But today it was in its channel, and the bank on the hither side was green with early summer growth. On the opposite shore the woods grew down to the brink, and upward the hill was clothed in the black green of hemlock laced with the delicate yellow of new birch, and the blending verdancy of rock maple. Laurel in full spate of rose and white bloom broke in soft cascades from the wall of foliage, hanging heavy heads so close to the water they must have been wet with spray.

Rhoda stopped the car to drink in the familiar beauty. She drew a deep breath, whispering, " 'Oh nymph rootbound, that fled Apollo!' Daphne certainly

Gallant Fraud

got herself a perfect sort of immortality. I wonder if she found it paid her for giving up the love of a god. Of course, though, the love was all on Apollo's side. Old Greece must have been very exciting with all the handsome young divinities out looking for romance. Too bad to waste it on Daphne. She should have lived in East Joppa. East Joppa would have been right up her alley."

"Woof," said Ersatz who hadn't come out in an automobile for the purpose of parking by a river and philosophizing however whimsically on time and change.

"All right, we'll go," Rhoda told him, "but bear in mind you'll have to stand a good deal of this. I like to look at flowers, so take a lesson from Ferdinand." She put the car into gear and the dog sighed happily.

She reached over and patted his head. He was going to be fine company. Having him to go about with, she wouldn't get nearly so dull or miss having people of her own age and interests no nearer than Bennetsville. For she couldn't be running over there every day though Gramp was generous about the car. Gerry would be gone in a few days besides, and she was out of touch with most of her other schoolmates. It would

Gallant Fraud

have been good fun if Jimmie had come as Gramp wanted him to, and had turned out to be the right sort. Even if he'd been the wrong sort, he'd have been better than nobody, and at least a counter irritant to Urson and Essie. Suppose he did come after all? He hadn't positively said he wouldn't. Of course neither she nor Amos had a bit of faith he would, but hope always outlasted faith, and the door of hope hadn't closed yet. How marvelous if he were to materialize all of a sudden, and how pleased Gramp would be. It ought to happen for Gramp's sake, if only to prove there was still some justice left in heaven.

It took some time to finish her errands. Ersatz turned out to have definite ideas about his collar and had to be cajoled into trying it on. Matching the blue wool had its difficulties, too, so it was mid-afternoon and time to meet Gerry before she knew it. Gerry was waiting when Rhoda drove up.

"Let's not stick around this house," she said. "I've been here all day getting things ready for Maine and listening to Mother tell me I ought to take better care of my clothes. I'm about exhausted."

"All right, get in. Where do you want to go?"

"After something cold. Let's stop at Haines's for a

Gallant Fraud

sundae. We can talk there without being interrupted, too, and I've got simply loads to tell you. Oh, for heavensake, where did you get that awful brute? Look! He's been all over the seat with his dirty paws."

"Get in back if you're afraid of soiling your dress," said Rhoda, "or wait. I'll shift him back and you can sit in front. See, the blanket has been over the seat."

"I suppose this is your grandfather's car." Gerry accepted the new adjustment and settled comfortably. "Aren't you lucky! Dad simply crabs if I so much as mention using his. I don't know what I would do if I had to stay at home all summer. Go crazy, I guess."

She pattered on, and Rhoda intent on guiding the big car through the narrow, hilly streets and past blind intersections, interrupted her only with monosyllabic murmurs until they were parked in front of Bennetsville's one attractive soda bar and restaurant. Gerry didn't notice. She needed no aid to continuous conversation.

It would have been hard to explain why she and Rhoda had been so intimate all through their academy course, unless it was that they had been attracted by their very unlikeness. Gerry was a lovely blond and as conscious of her feminine allure as Rhoda was ob-

Gallant Fraud

livious of hers. She had little or no interest in anything that required mental effort. School had been a social gathering to her, and the only subject on which she had concentrated was the practical management of romantic youths. Yet for some odd reason she had selected Rhoda for her confidante, and Rhoda, possibly fascinated by gifts so different from her own, just as Gerry might have been by Rhoda's more substantial qualities, and perhaps, if the truth were known, a little flattered at being chosen by one so little dependent on feminine friendship, had an honest affection for the undeniably selfish and frivolous Gerry.

It was like old times to sit together at their favorite table at Haines's and to exchange all the gossip of the past year. The last delicious scraping of syrup had been savored before the subject of summer plans moved up to the agenda.

"Don't tell me you're going to stay in East Joppa until next September," protested Gerry. "Darling, you'll absolutely pass out from boredom. Simply nothing ever happened there, and nothing ever will."

"I wouldn't say that," said Rhoda, feeling a stubborn urge to defend her native village against the patronage of a mere Bennetsvillian. "You can't say

Gallant Fraud

never exactly. We had the Indian massacre, and the British raid in 1778, and the flood in '36, and the hurricane last year."

"Be your age," said Gerry disgustedly. "You can't depend on Indians, though I've no doubt your great grandmother got quite excited over them, and the British are too busy fighting the Germans to bother with anybody else. As for the flood and the hurricane, it isn't the right time of year, besides that's not what I mean. So what?"

"Make my own excitement, I guess," replied Rhoda. "Do you believe it's possible to get things to happen if you think about them enough? Some people do. We used to talk a lot about it at college and one of the girls asked the psych prof if there was anything in it. He said there was nothing to show it might not be possible if one could discover the right approach. Of course there are people like the New Thinkers who practice something of the sort."

"Oh well, somebody's always practicing something and you hear all sorts of funny ideas. Did I write you about that cockeyed woman artist Dad and I met when we were in New York last winter?"

"You didn't even write me you'd been there. Were you visiting your sister?"

Gallant Fraud

"Yes, and I hope to tell you I'm simply gaga about her apartment. It's the duckiest thing and if there's a smoother brother-in-law than Bill I have yet to see him. I hope I snare something just like him."

"What about the artist?"

"Oh, she's somebody Bill knew before he and Eve were married. She was having an exhibition or something and Bill said why didn't we go see it because he thought Dad would get a kick out of it. The way she does, she paints pictures of peoples' souls or personalities, I guess. She shuts her eyes and thinks hard about the person and the picture comes right out on the inside of her eyelids, then she goes and paints it just as she sees it. She's got pictures of the souls of a lot of prominent people like Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin. They looked a lot like those funnydiddles of Picasso's everybody talks about, only quite a lot worse if you know what I mean. She'd just finished one of President Roosevelt, too, and when Dad looked at it he said, 'My God, Bill, I knew there must have been some good reason why I voted for Landon.' So you see as I say, you never can tell what people will think up next."

Gerry's reason rarely made sense but she always fetched up with the conclusion she had started out

Gallant Fraud

after. "In that case," laughed Rhoda, "I'll be right in fashion if I do something on my own."

"Well, at least try not to turn screwball. Really all you need is to—" She broke off and leaning forward asked in a hushed whisper, "Do you see what I see? Over there at the table near the counter. Be careful he doesn't catch you looking."

Obediently Rhoda stole a carefully guarded glance in the direction indicated.

"Isn't he perfectly terrific?" breathed Gerry. "Where do you suppose he sprang from?"

"I wouldn't know," murmured Rhoda. "Most likely he's a tourist." Though she wouldn't have admitted it she was nearly as thrilled as Gerry.

"And maybe he just isn't. In that case wouldn't it be my poisonous luck to be going away tomorrow? Wait a minute. He's almost through. There's no harm getting a close-up of him."

"Please!" gasped Rhoda, who disliked having Gerry's technique extended to herself.

"Don't be silly, come along," retorted the other. "See, he's getting up. We can pass him at the cash register."

Peter had noticed the two girls before they saw him.

Gallant Fraud

The fluffy little piece that looked like a spray of goldenrod in her green frock had been chattering thirteen to the dozen, and he'd be willing to wager saying nothing at all. He'd met the type often. But the other kept his eyes returning for frequent and furtive observations. She probably wouldn't rate as high a percentage on a movie scout's score card, but to his mind she had it all over Miss Yellowtop. There was something more enduring than young prettiness in the lines of that profile. He suspected a whimsical quiver hovering on those lips, and was sure there would be a matching twinkle in her eyes. He wished he could see the eyes. They should be dark and dancing with intelligence and humor. The soft ripple of her laughter gave him a pleasant confirmation of his guess. But he'd better not let them catch him watching. She was the kind to be embarrassed by a staring stranger.

He concentrated on his dessert, just missing the by-play at the other table. The mechanic had promised the car in half an hour. He'd have to decide whether to put up here in Bennetsville or push on to Hanover. He glanced at his watch, rose, and lifted his hat from the peg above the table. Turning, he very nearly bumped into the blond girl.

Gallant Fraud

Very nearly, but not quite nearly enough to account for her dropping her handbag with that startled squeal. So she was running true to form as he had predicted, he thought with some exasperation as he stooped to retrieve the pocketbook and offer the conventional apology. The sunshine of her smile was entirely lost on him. He didn't so much as see it, for he was looking past her and into the face of her companion. He had guessed right about the eyes. They were dark, not brown, but deep green with lively amber lights that made them seem tawny—hazel, that was it, the kind of eyes that changed color with their owner's mood. Now their expression was half amused, half deprecating, entirely confirmatory of his doubts as to the authenticity of the accident. With less ceremony than reflex action he thrust the bag into Goldenrod's hands, and missed her second smile by a full head. Then he stepped back for them to pass, and managed to fumble fairly convincingly with his own pocketbook and check until they had gone out.

The clerk rang up the cash register and handed him his change with a grin.

"Real pretty girls we grow here in Vermont, mis-

Gallant Fraud

ter," he said. "That blond one is some dolly, ain't she? Her pa's one of the big bugs here in town. He goes to the state legislature."

"Who's the dark one?" asked Peter nonchalantly.

"I couldn't say," apologized the clerk. "I never seen her before, but then I ain't worked here but six months. I come from Lanesboro," he added informatively. "That's north of here quite a piece. Business was pretty dull up there last winter, so I says to myself, 'Herb, I guess it's about time you dug out and went down to Bennetsville and looked yourself a good job,' and so I ——"

"That was very smart of you," commended Peter.

"Yeah, I am kinda smart. Always was. Was you aimin' to go north yourself? If you git to Lanesboro and want a good place to stop the night my sister takes tourists. She'd be pleased to put you up. Her name's ——"

"Thank you," said Peter. "I haven't decided how far I'll go yet, so I'd better get started."

He went out as quickly as possible, but when he reached the sidewalk the girls were already out of sight. Oh, well, he thought, what difference did it

Gallant Fraud

make if he hadn't seen in what direction she went? He'd probably never have met her again anyway, so why give her a second thought?

However, he did give her a second thought and a third and a fourth. If she lived in this region why shouldn't he come across her while he was scouting the East Joppa power project?

4



WELL, of all the stuffed shirts!" Gerry had exclaimed as the two girls moved out of hearing. "Why, I might as well have been a piece of plate glass, the way he looked through me, and I thought he was going to be the human sort."

"Maybe he was human enough to watch his step," replied Rhoda. "You weren't very subtle, darling. Every attractive man in the world must have had that old trick pulled on him plenty often. Look, it's after four and I must be getting back. I'll take you home first. No, it isn't a bit of trouble really."

She almost pushed Gerry into the car. She knew she couldn't bear it if the stranger were to come out of the restaurant and the little wretch started something else.

With Ersatz dancing on the back seat like a dervish and bouncing against her neck at every third twirl,

Gallant Fraud

she managed to get the car out of the narrow parking space and away up the street before this happened. She drove in a silence which was not altogether her fault, for it would have been difficult to edge even a short sentence into the stream of disgusted comment Gerry was pouring steadily over her. She was glad when they reached the Faulkner house.

"Snap out of it, kid," she said then with praiseworthy good humor. "What's one man in your life? You're going to meet dozens more interesting than this one this summer, and they'll probably all be interested besides. Good-bye now. I hope you have a marvelous time and come home with a square emerald the size of a curbstone."

"Believe me, if I don't—" giggled Gerry. "Honestly, hon, I do wish you were going along. I hate to think of you vegetating in East Joppa."

"Forget it," returned Rhoda. "How do you know I haven't a handsome husband growing for me on a bean vine?"

"Wire me collect if he ripens," said Gerry. "Well, good-bye if you won't come in."

Rhoda turned back to the main street. She really was not in a hurry except to get away from Gerry's chat-

Gallant Fraud

ter which suddenly as never before struck her as silly and boring. She didn't believe for a minute the man in the restaurant had been a stuffed shirt. He was simply too decent to take advantage of a chance thrown at him so obviously. Gerry had been absolutely raw. Rhoda blushed, remembering. She did hope he hadn't thought she was that kind of girl, too.

A horrid trickle of suspicion turned her cold. Down in her secret heart wasn't she that kind? Wouldn't she be pleased now if something should happen to make him speak to her—something that didn't show so clearly on the surface what it was? Was he still in Bennetsville and would she ever meet him again, or was he going on? Like a rabbit from a hat a most preposterous theory popped up. Suppose he were Jimmie! What would Jimmie look like? All the Burnham men were rather dark-skinned—so was this man. Burnham men were tall and leanly built. So was the stranger. They had dark blue eyes, and the eyes that had looked beyond Gerry into hers had been dark blue. As far as looks went he might easily be Jimmie. How absolutely thrilling!

One had to be practical even in the stress of excitement. She had planned to stop at the service station

Gallant Fraud

and take in gas. Since Gramp was so good about the car it was only fair to leave it as she found it and not put him to inconvenience. It wouldn't take but a minute or two.

"Ten," she said to the pump boy, and got out to put Ersatz and his blanket back on the front seat. She had just completed this when she noticed the heavy maroon car standing inside the garage door. The dusk of the interior hid it for the most part, but she was sure, though at the distance she could not identify it, that the number plate was from out of the state. At that moment she saw something else. The back of a tall figure with broad shoulders and a dark head, intent on something the mechanic was pointing out.

She hoped she spoke unemotionally. "That's a nice looking car," she said to the attendant. "What make is it?"

"Lincoln," said the youth, "and boy, is she a sweet job! Give her a Chinaman's chance and she'd sail through the Siegfried Line. Wisconsin license. Driver's a nice spoken feller like most of them middlewesterners."

"Thanks," said Rhoda, feeling as lightheaded as if the pump had dispensed gas for her instead of her engine. "Yes, you may check the oil and water."

Gallant Fraud

It couldn't be true, she argued with herself. Only in a story could anything so perfect happen. The odds were all against its being Jimmie. A hundred young men might be driving Wisconsin cars through Vermont at this season. And yet, didn't that mean one chance out of a hundred? Should she make some excuse to go into the garage? Why not? And why not then be matter of fact about it and say to the stranger, "Excuse me, please, but are you by any chance my cousin Jimmie? I've been expecting him on from the west." If only there weren't such a lot of people standing around and listening! But some of the mechanics very likely knew her by sight as Amos Burnham's granddaughter, and how foolish she would look if it all came to nothing and they had it to gossip and laugh over.

"You don't know which way he's heading, do you?" she inquired of the boy.

"Nope, but he did ask if the East Joppa road turned off from route 53."

She hardly knew how she managed to steer the car back into the street, the haze of stardust was so thick. He had asked the way to East Joppa! If she had looked back at that moment, she would have seen that he had come out of the garage and was gazing after her

Gallant Fraud

with an expression suggesting emotions quite as conflicting as her own. But she was all unaware that like the Arcadian lovers they had almost touched. All she knew was that she must think and think fast. Just why she had to speak to the stranger right away she could not have explained. Certainly if he actually were Jimmie there was no point in her intercepting him on the road. He would turn up of his own accord in East Joppa in another hour or so, and then the question would be definitely settled. What more point could there be in stopping him and finding out that he was, as undoubtedly he would prove to be, no one she had ever heard of before? But this last question was like an inherited superstition, likely to fade into nothing if you didn't drop a curtain between it and the light of reason. Rhoda promptly dropped a curtain. Whether it made sense or not, she was going to stop him. A malicious imp kicked his spurred heels against her conscience. Wasn't this exactly the sort of thing she had been condemning Gerry for? But no, she argued, what she meant to do was something that would look perfectly natural, besides, she was doing it for a very different and wholly legitimate reason. She was doing it for Gramp much more than for her-

Gallant Fraud

self, too, she added, so soothed by the thought she did not recognize its speciousness.

Route 53! She had left the last straggling houses of the town behind her and was in the open country, with the road running between cleared fields and ducking at intervals into stretches of woodland. When she came to the next of these she slowed down, drew the car to the shoulder and stopped. Ersatz reared himself on stubby legs and hung out of the window, watching her curiously as she walked deliberately to the left rear wheel and just as deliberately turned the air valve. One of Amos Burnham's newest and most pampered tires sighed its soul out in the cause of youth.

Rhoda sat down on the running board and waited. Like the old woman in the nursery rhyme, her only proof that this was indeed she lay in her dog. But Ersatz still seemed to recognize her. He cavorted happily when she released him, and though he dashed joyfully into the underbrush and made excited excursions up and down the road, he warily returned at intervals to make sure she was still there. He was taking no chance on being deserted a second time.

A bread truck zoomed by, stopped and backed up.

Gallant Fraud

A pleasant faced young driver in khaki uniform leaned out hopefully. "Need a hand, lady?" he asked.

Rhoda shook her head. "No thank you, I'll be all right. My cousin is coming along presently," she answered with amazing confidence.

Other cars passed, some with complete indifference, but most with kindly offers. To each she made the same reply. After the second time it sounded so convincing she almost laughed at her lingering doubt. "I'm sure he must be Jimmie," she said aloud. "Oh, come on, Jimmie. What's keeping you so long?"

Something glittering was coming over the hill and coming fast. A maroon car—the Lincoln. "Oh, please, please!" prayed Rhoda, the rest of the petition being lost in a chaos of desire.

Peter was feeling very sore with himself. What a fool he had been to bother having the car shined up. It would be dusty again within five miles. If he'd called it a job with the lubrication, he'd have been out in the yard when she drove up to the pumps. Then he could have seen whether she went out of town or not. This distinctly was not his lucky day. Perhaps he'd better go on to Hanover after all. He'd have to decide before he reached the road to East

Gallant Fraud

Joppa. He stepped nervously on the gas and another hill flattened out under his wheels. Then he grunted dismally as he saw the stalled car with a woman standing beside it. If there was any one thing he despised it was changing tires, but you couldn't ignore a stranded female. Confusion seize the inventors of chivalry! He supposed he was for it.

Then, O mirabile dictu! This was his lucky day after all. The Lincoln nearly stood on its nose as he jammed on his brakes.

Slipping out from under the wheel he strode forward. "Trouble?" he asked, and wondered if the word had ever before had such a delightful connotation.

She laughed. It sounded nervous to herself, but only apologetic to him. "I'm afraid so. Stupid of me, but I've got a flat."

He wanted to say, "Lady, you've got everything else beside." Indeed, it was on the tip of his tongue, but something about her, the same something that had distinguished her from her yellow haired companion, warned him to advance slowly. His observation, however, went by leaps and bounds. She was all he had dreamed she would be now he saw her at close range. Yet there was nothing dramatic about her looks.

Gallant Fraud

Rather, at first sight, what she had was the peculiar charm that makes a smooth brown cedar waxwing one of the most fascinating of birds. Impressed by the trim compactness of the little figure and the harmony of line and color in the heartshaped face which, from the dusky rose on the lovely, rather high cheekbones to the jacqueminot velvet of the lips that showed a flash of white teeth between their faintly gamin curves, owed nothing to makeup, one might call her merely delightfully natural and healthy rather than pretty. But not Peter. He knew by instinct that before you had known her long you would be using the word beautiful to express her, and yet, oddly, if he had been asked to give a detailed description of her, he would have had to fall back on the ridiculous statement that she was the kind of girl who could wear a foolish hat and have it look like sense. In fact she was wearing one, and it struck him as the perfection of sanity.

Rhoda had no means of guessing what was passing in his mind from the prosaic and cheerful manner in which he said, "We'll have to do something about it. Have you the keys, so I can get at the spare?"

She handed them over with an equally prosaic re-

Gallant Fraud

joinder. Now that the moment she had schemed for was upon her, all the artful methods of leading up to the important question of his identity which she had conjured up while waiting fell to pieces like a page of rain sodden newspaper, leaving her mind as blankly uninformed on the current issue as before.

"Oh, dear," she thought, "why doesn't he hurry up and say something to start me off? It's as hard as ever to walk up and say, 'Aren't you my cousin Jimmie?' But we're never going to get there if we stick to the subject of spare tires."

"I'm afraid I'm making you a lot of trouble," she ventured desperately. "I ought to have waited for a truck driver. They don't mind this sort of thing."

"I was lucky to get here first," said Peter blithely, unscrewing a nut and taking his time about it. "I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

She flushed. "You sound horribly sarcastic, but I suppose I asked for it."

"But I didn't mean it sarcastically, I assure you. I'm in definite and deadly earnest." He pulled off the wheel and looked it over critically and inscrutably before lifting his eyes to hers.

The wind must have veered south with a vengeance,

Gallant Fraud

for as their gaze met all the stiffness bred of their mutual anxiety to please dissolved in laughter.

"Pardon me," said Peter, "but haven't we met before?"

Her lashes flickered deliciously over her dancing eyes. "Why, I do believe," she said with nice surprise, "you are the young man I saw in the restaurant."

"The very same. The kind of poor sap who passes up a swell opportunity and lives to regret it."

"I'll have to tell Gerry," said Rhoda.

"Is Gerry your blond friend?"

"Yes, don't you think she is awfully pretty?"

"Quite awfully, but would you mind keeping my sad secret? I'm completely satisfied, you see, at getting this second chance. Actually it's my third, for I just missed making connections with you at the gas station."

At last she had her cue! "Oh," she said in what she hoped was a very casual tone, "was that your car I saw at the garage? The one with a Wisconsin plate?"

He bent to hide the twinkle in his eyes. "Then you noticed?"

"I always notice out-of-state cars," she replied primly. "Besides, I—I'm interested in anything from Wisconsin."

Gallant Fraud

"You are! Perhaps you've lived there then."

"Oh, no. I just happen to know someone who does. A boy who goes to the University of Wisconsin. You—you don't happen to be a U. of W. man yourself, do you?" She held her breath.

Now why was she so eager, he wondered. "I'm sorry. They say it's a fine college and I suppose I'd naturally have fetched up there, if my father hadn't wanted to send me to his own alma mater." It certainly was funny that the place from which he had taken his degree could affect her so seriously. She looked as if she had lost the last train.

"Oh," she said in a sort of gasp, "that's—that's very interesting."

But it wasn't interesting. It was devastating. He wasn't Jimmie. Not until that was an established fact did she realize how firmly the hope that he was had intrenched itself in plausibility.

Peter brushed the dust from his trousers while he watched her furtively, wondering what to say next, if anything. A disagreeable suspicion reared its ugly head. Who was this goof she was so concerned over that she went about stopping a Wisconsin car just to ask after him? For she had stopped him. That tire hadn't gone flat of its own accord. If any man had

Gallant Fraud

been cad enough to reduce a girl like her to taking such a method of getting news of him he deserved to have his confounded neck wrung. Peter's fingers itched to take on the job. He took a step towards her, and something in his own throat tightened when he saw her swallow hard before she could speak.

"I suppose," she said, "it was silly of me to ask that. You wouldn't even know of a Jimmie Brown, would you?" Her forced smile twanged at his heartstrings.

So that was the name of the dumb cluck, was it? "I only wish I did," he answered with a fervor she couldn't appreciate, "but I haven't that pleasure."

"Well," she said, with a fairly good imitation of briskness, "I should have known there wouldn't be the faintest chance you would. Thank you a lot for changing the tire. I hope I haven't delayed you too much. Come, Ersatz. Come on, boy. We're going now."

She was going, and he hadn't yet found out anything about her except that she had nearly cried because he hadn't know this rah-rah boy from the state U. He had to do something to keep her until he knew where to find her again.

Unexpected help just then burst out of the underbrush in the form of a dishevelled arrangement of

Gallant Fraud

hairy legs and wriggling body which hurled itself panting and grinning at the girl.

"Good Lord," said Peter, grasping at this convenient straw, "what was it you called him?"

"Ersatz," repeated Rhoda. "Don't you think it's a grand name for him?"

"It's terrific," replied Peter, "but do you mind telling me what it is he's substituting for?"

"He isn't. He's really an original. I named him that because he's synthetic and amusing. I always was fascinated by substitutes. They have such romantic possibilities, don't you think? There was Rupert of Hentzau, you know, and—and— Well, anyway there was Rupert." She giggled. He found he admired giggles. Perhaps since she could laugh, that ass, Brown, wasn't so important after all.

"Yes, there was Rupert," he agreed, "and there's Postum. I begin to feel a growing vocation for substitution. How does one get that way?"

And now what the dickens had he said? At least it hadn't scared her away, though it seemed to have stricken her dumb. She had dropped down like a shot on the running board of the car, her finger in the collar of that amazingly conglomerate pup.

In Rhoda's mind desire was spurring invention hard.

Gallant Fraud

How deeply that desire had taken root and how fast it had grown since the idea of Jimmie's visit had been planted she was still unaware, just as she was ignorant of how that growth had actually obliterated the causes on which it had fed. She had not wanted to admit even to herself that the summer actually did stretch before her like a lonely waste, made all the more dreary by Urson and Essie. She had tried to believe in the thin arguments with which she had met Gerry's slurs, but she had not felt the cheerful lightness with which she had made them. She had fastened on Jimmie as the answer to everything. She had actually made herself believe Jimmie had materialized in response to that mysterious psychologic abracadabra she had invoked when she told Gerry it was possible to make what you wanted happen if you thought right. But what she had conjured up was not Jimmie but Peter—Peter who was so much better than anything she could have dreamed of he almost took her breath away. And Peter was slipping through her fingers. She had to stop him at any cost. It was simply unbearable to think she might lose him forever. Why, she wanted him to come to East Joppa more than she had ever wanted anything else in her whole life. As if in answer to this overwhelming need a swift and daring plan was

Gallant Fraud

taking form in her mind. It was not altogether a selfish plan either. If she could carry it through it would mean almost as much to Gramp as to herself—well, it would mean something anyway to Gramp. If only Peter would agree. He had to agree!

"Listen," Peter was saying desperately. "I've seen right along something is bothering you. Isn't there anything I can do about it?"

"I—don't—know," she said slowly. "I didn't suppose there was until you said that about getting to be a substitute, and then, all of a sudden I had a completely wild idea."

"I must be thick. I don't get the connection."

"You couldn't unless you knew the circumstances."

"Won't you explain them to me? I know it's asking a good deal for a perfect stranger."

"I couldn't explain except to a perfect stranger," she answered. "You see, I thought you might be Jimmie. I was trying to bring it out tactfully. But you aren't, and I know now it was only wishful thinking that had led me to make myself practically believe you were."

A car approached, honked derisively and passed. The driver leered back at them sardonically.

"We seem to be entertaining the traffic," said Peter.

Gallant Fraud

"Isn't there somewhere less conspicuous we could go if we are to talk?"

"We'd better move," she agreed. "Somebody might recognize me and then it would be no use talking anyway."

"You live near?"

"In East Joppa."

Business and pleasure were both playing on Peter's team today for a fact, he thought. And what luck he hadn't mentioned his name. Whether all East Joppa was Hamilton conscious, he couldn't, of course, tell, but it was just as well not to take any risks.

"Then you must know the lay of the land."

"Yes. I'll tell you. There's a tea room about half a mile farther on. It's kept by a city woman who comes here summers. She wouldn't know who I am."

"Then go ahead. I'll follow—in case another tire gives out."

She laughed. "I suppose that was a silly trick, but I was simply wild to speak to you."

"I have a different word for it, but don't let's waste our time here. I'll see you at the tea room."

Not until he was back in his own car with a chance to think without her disturbing presence, did he make

Gallant Fraud

a perfectly obvious and very cheering deduction. If she had thought he might be Jimmie, it must follow that she had never seen the brute himself. She couldn't even know what he looked like. Ergo, it was completely unlikely that Jimmie had ever sustained the role of heart throb for her. The elimination of Jimmie as a sweetheart reduced the mystery to a normal temperature.

Ten minutes later, over superfluous servings of mushy ice cream at the most isolated corner table in the tea shop, they took up the broken thread of discussion.

"Well, you see it's this way." Rhoda drew a deep breath and plunged into her story, stopping for nothing, now she was off to a start, until she had given him a comprehensive outline of family history with special reference to Jimmie. She dwelt with fervor on Gramp's perennial disappointment at never seeing his longed-for grandson.

"And so," she concluded, "I must have had it so much on my mind that when I saw you and discovered you were from Wisconsin and got it from the gaspump boy that you had inquired about East Joppa, I simply went haywire. I absolutely couldn't wait to

Gallant Fraud

find out, and you can imagine what a let down it was to find you not only weren't Jimmie, but never had heard of him."

"Yes, that isn't hard to understand. But now to the point in hand. What did you think I could do about it? Your grandfather wouldn't be interested in a perfectly strange young man. He wants his grandson."

"But don't you see? I told you it was a crazy idea, but I do think it would work."

"You aren't suggesting I substitute for Cousin Jimmie, by any chance, are you? Without letting the old gentleman know, I mean."

She scraped up a spoonful of wilted cream, looked at it and put it back again. "Uhuh," she said. "I think it could be managed. If we are smart—and we ought to be smart enough. Of course, Gramp is smart, too. It wouldn't do to relax and get careless. We'd have to put on a good show. But then, you wouldn't have to stay on and on. You'd want to be going anyway, and he'd be pleased enough with just the fact that Jimmie had taken pains to come."

Peter hesitated. It was a temptation. The risks were by no means overwhelming. Evidently Grandpa Brown knew as little about Jimmie as Peter Hamilton

Gallant Fraud

did. A week in East Joppa would be just the ticket for getting the lowdown on the stock transfer trouble. Why, he might even get acquainted with old Amos Burnham himself while he was being Mr. Brown's little boy. What was more alluring than the cold business proposition was the inestimable pleasure of sharing a secret with grandpa's precious granddaughter. But though all this appealed to Peter's sense of youthful adventure, it somehow went against a more straightforward grain he hadn't suspected had developed so strongly in the last year or so. This was a masquerade—a prank. He didn't like it.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't work," he said reluctantly. "I'm not much of an actor. I'd be pretty sure to make a mess of it. I'm sorry."

"But I'd stand by, and I'd take the blame if anything went wrong."

"You don't seriously think I'd allow that do you, Miss Brown?"

"I suppose you wouldn't. But the name isn't Brown. I told you Jimmie's stepfather adopted him. Gramp's name is Burnham—Amos Burnham, and mine is Rhoda."

Peter felt as if he had stepped on a live wire and the

Gallant Fraud

shock had run up his spine and curdled the roots of his hair. He almost wondered if it hadn't leaped across to her. Apparently it hadn't or else she was so insulated by her intentness on her scheme she hadn't felt it. He managed to recover himself in time to respond before she could notice any gap in the conversation.

"It's a lovely name," he said, "and I'm glad to have something to call you by, Rhoda. Mine is Peter—Peter-er-Belding." He hoped his brother-in-law, Fenton Belding, who was something of a stickler for propriety, would never discover this high-handed appropriation of his surname.

"I'd find it easy to call you Jimmie because I've thought of you that way," said Rhoda. "Oh, please do be Jimmie, just for a few days! It will make Gramp so happy!"

He thought rapidly. There was something ominously uncanny about the way everything had moved up to this climax so smoothly. Uncle Henry had said, "Circumstances may give you precisely the right opening." They had with a vengeance.

"Well," he said, "well ——"

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda clapped her hands. "You're going to. Oh, I knew the minute I saw you everything would be right."

"You're taking a big chance on me. After all, you don't know a thing about me except that I come from Wisconsin."

"But that's just it. I feel as if you had been sent, like Lohengrin to Elsa."

"Ummm, but as I recall ——"

"It was her own fault things went wrong," protested the girl eagerly. "I won't be like her, truly. I promise to let you go without a single question. It's Gramp that matters."

He drew a deep breath and dived. "All right, Elsa, my trusty swan will dock at East Joppa this evening. Now I'd better go over the evidence again and get myself thoroughly documented. As you say, we've got to be smart."

Rhoda's face was as luminous as a child's on Christmas morning. "I don't know how to thank you," she said.

What a darling she was, thought Peter, and he said smiling, "We should be able to figure out a way."

Gallant Fraud

A long howl, piercing and dolorous came from outside.

"Ersatz!" said Rhoda, choking on a laugh.

"Yes, Ersatz," replied Peter grinning responsively.

"Maybe he should howl. Look what he's started."

5



AMOS BURNHAM tossed the last handful of yellow corn into the milling and clucking flock of fat Plymouth Rocks and hasped the door of the hen yard. He made a placid survey of the blue sky and the sparkling sunlight overflowing the pleasant domestic scene that surrounded him, and then gazed ruminatively toward the house where, as he well knew, breakfast awaited him and the good-looking young man who had so unexpectedly arrived to stay with him last evening.

Jimmie? Well, no, not unless his memory failed him worse than he believed it did. A brown-eyed little boy didn't grow up into a blue-eyed man even in this day of plastic surgery and quaint scientific miracles. Of course, Amos hadn't seen Jimmie since the latter was less than a year old, but he recollected very clearly that while the child had resembled the Burnhams in a lot

Gallant Fraud

of ways, he'd had his mother's dark eyes. But he hadn't said anything when Rhoda had opened the door to the visitor and had cried out all of a sudden, "Why, Gramp, it's Jimmie," before the fellow had had a chance to open his mouth to say who he was.

Rhoda, the little tadpole! What was she up to? He'd warrant she'd seen this lad before. Much too pat his turning up like this right after the talk they two had had about Jim that very morning. But he'd give the youngsters enough rope. If they were putting something over on the old man it was likely to be innocent enough. Just like her to think he was disappointed over Jimmie's not coming and try to do something about it. But who was this chap and where'd he come from and how'd she got hold of him? Sort of interesting. Going to be fun to see what they'd make of it all themselves.

"Hey, Mag!" he said to the old horse who whinnied to him as he entered the barn. "Cute doings, ain't it? But you'n me don't have to take our own head till we sense somebody's drivin' of us into trouble, do we?"

He forked a liberal allowance of hay into her manger, dusted himself off and walked contentedly toward the kitchen.

Gallant Fraud

Peter was already there. No one had been in sight when he came down stairs, but a nose titillating fragrance of breakfast pervaded the empty rooms, growing stronger and stronger as he made his way through them toward the back of the house and coming to such a climax as he pushed open the kitchen door that Mahatma Ghandi himself might have lost self-control. As for Peter, he decided once and for all to go in a large way for the best criminal tradition and pass out on a full stomach if a figurative beheading were, as he feared, in store for him.

The room itself was a revelation to him. He had read and heard all his life of spacious New England kitchens, but this was his first experience with one, and the big, sunny room, literally twinkling, from the polished range to the well-waxed linoleum, the pots of thrifty plants on the window sills, not to mention the table, cozily set with a bright checked cloth and a homely but cheerful array of unmatched china, was so exactly right he felt he had stepped into the setting for an animated cartoon.

But there was nothing theatrical about the plump, bespectacled elderly woman who looked over her shoulder and called out a hearty good-morning emphasized by a wave of a flapjack turner.

Gallant Fraud

"My sakes," said Almira Fisher, "if you ain't come just as I was gittin' set to call you! Do step to the door and holler to your grandpa. He would have to be out there fussin' over them hens right when I've got breakfast all ready to go onto the table. You can set right down yourself for I'll have these cakes off the griddle in two shakes of a lamb's tail. My, my, it does seem good to have young folks round again. I hope you brought your appetite along of you, Jimmie."

"Only wait till I begin demonstrating for you," said Peter, stepping obediently to the door. "But here comes Grandfather now, and he's got Rhoda with him."

"I suspicioned she'd be around, so I set a place for her," replied Almira with a little grunt of satisfaction.

Peter was glad to realize she had missed the brief difficulty he had found in giving Mr. Burnham the title, and also that she had not noticed the eagerness with which he had announced Rhoda.

"Mornin', Jimmie," said Amos Burnham, grasping the younger man's hand in a firm and friendly grip. "You're on hand real prompt. Looks like your trip hadn't used you up enough to make you oversleep, but you young folks seem to be able to take it. Takes more'n five-six hundred miles a day to put you under,

Gallant Fraud

I guess. Here's your Cousin Rhoda runnin' around bright and early, too. But then, she would be. She'll be stakin' a claim onto you, most likely, 'count of her bein' smart enough to recognize you the way she did."

"Hi, Jimmie," said Rhoda, her eyes dancing. "Don't let Gramp give you an impression I'm a forward hussy, for I'm nothing of the kind. I'm a very nice girl."

She lifted a laughing face, and Peter, who whether this was intended as a challenge or not did not mean to lose any privilege of the position she had wished upon him, promptly kissed her lightly but squarely on her lovely lips.

Amos chuckled. Whoever the scamp was he could hold up his end with her. He liked the looks of the boy, even if he was pretending to be somebody he wasn't. It wouldn't do her a mite of harm to find out she couldn't monkey with fireworks. Not that Amos wouldn't himself be on the watch to see she didn't get scorched, but let the kids play their game. The old man could afford to enjoy it from the side.

"Don't take long to get acquainted, does it?" he remarked. "Well, now the preliminaries is over, let's get down to business. Where you want Jimmie should

Gallant Fraud

set, Mira? The end nearest the base o' supplies, I warrant, so's you can stuff him like a Thanksgiving turkey."

"You go 'long, Amos Burnham," retorted Cousin Mira. "I don't have to stuff my good victuals into any soul alive, and well you know it."

"We all know it, Cousin Mira," interposed Rhoda. "You'll have to get used to this kind of banter, Jimmie. It's one of those good old family jokes without any point. We abound in them."

Peter's spirits had zoomed upward. That kiss had been as stimulating as a cocktail. "I'm strong for all the family stuff, particularly the Burnham sense of humor," he said suavely drawing out Rhoda's chair and seating her.

She bit her lip. She'd have to warn him as soon as they were alone against cracks with a dangerous double meaning. Right now Gramp was too much delighted with his Jimmie to take much notice, but once the new had worn off it might be another story. And if the boy thought he had been given a right to kiss her—well! She blushed furiously and dropped her napkin. She and Peter dived simultaneously to get it and their heads met in a resounding crack.

Gallant Fraud

"That ought to have broken the last bit of ice," he laughed, ruefully rubbing his crown, "that is, if you feel as I do."

"I feel worse, if anything," she conceded with watering eyes. "It's going to take an extra shot of cakes and syrup to deaden the pain. Come on, Cousin Mira, we're going to stop behaving like idiots and give the food its innings. Oh, heaven! I didn't mean that! Jimmie, it really was inadvertent."

The laughter eased the tension, or at least what little was left of it.

Amos Burnham let the palest of amber streams trickle over his pancakes. "You get any maple honey like this out your way?" he asked innocently. "This here's some of this spring's run made out of sap from the trees your great-grandpa set out."

"It's perfect," replied Peter, "but I wouldn't know where ours comes from except out of the bottles. That may be just my own ignorance though, so don't hold it against Wisconsin."

"Guess maybe they make other use of their woodlots," Amos rambled serenely. "There, there, Miry, let up. You've got me stoked plenty, the others too, I reckon. Grab a bite or two for yourself, why don't

Gallant Fraud

you? Me, I've got to save space for a piece o' pie. Don't seem like a real meal without pie. Yeah, they use considerable of their lumber in the mills, don't they, Jim? Got some big paper pulp companies out there, ain't you?"

"I—er—why yes, I believe there are a number," stammered Peter. "Yes, Cousin Mira, I would like another cup of coffee. It's the best I ever tasted."

If the old gentleman was going to talk about paper mills, he thought, this was the place to keep both ears open and a close mouth. He might be able to pick up all the information Uncle Henry needed right on the spot without any disagreeable snooping. Somehow snooping seemed more than ever repulsive here in this friendly kitchen with its atmosphere of frank and genial hospitality.

"Ummm," said Amos, "ever hear of a concern called the Hamilton Mills?" He pushed the cream jug across to Peter and a drop jolted out onto the table.

Cousin Mira expostulated. "How many times, Amos Burnham, have I told you not to push that pitcher? Now you've gone and spotted my clean cloth."

"Pay no attention," grinned Amos. "Miry has to fuss at a man just so much. All'at saves you is bein'

Gallant Fraud

company. What was I sayin'? Oh, about them Hamilton Mills."

"I've heard of them," said Peter guardedly, "like everybody in the state most likely. They do a pretty wide spread business."

"Humph, yes, so I figgered." He ate placidly on, apparently having exhausted the subject as far as his interest was concerned.

Peter ventured, "I don't suppose there's much manufacturing done in this region though you seem to have plenty of water power. Isn't it rather a pity to let it go to waste?"

"It's most too good, come flood time. Well, we did do a little manufacturing a spell back. Had a paper mill of our own, 's a matter o' fact. 'Twas doin' pretty well, too, till the depression got to it. It might even of weathered through and paid dividends again at that, if it hadn't been put out of commission by the high water in '36. This Hamilton company wants to buy it up and run it to handle the trade in the east. Someways it looks a good plan, others it don't." He stopped short again and changed the subject. "What you youngsters aimin' to do to amuse yourselves this mornin'?" he asked. "It's up to you to do the entertainin' of your

Gallant Fraud

cousin, Rhody. Gramp's got business as usual, but I guess you can make out without the old man."

"But," began Rhoda impulsively, "I—that is, Jimmie came to see you, not me. Don't you want to take him to the store with you? You might like to show him ——"

"What? A stack o' feed sacks?" chuckled Amos. "Or do you think he'd be interested in the samples o' potato fertilizer? That'd be real good fun for him, now wouldn't it?" He disposed of his last bite of pie and pushed back his chair. Rising, he laid a big old hand on Peter's shoulder.

"No, no," he said, "it's enough for me to have you here, boy, and to see you're the kind of grandson a man can feel to take pride in. I'll do my visitin' with you when and as I get my chance. You youngsters run along and get acquainted. Take Jimmie around in the car, Rhody, and show him a bit of the country where his folks have lived ever since the white men came to the valley."

Peter had a mighty desire to crawl under the table. A little more of this and he'd have to own up he was a fraud, Rhoda or no Rhoda. You couldn't go on hoaxing a man like Amos Burnham who openly trusted you. But Rhoda was shooting him warning looks.

Gallant Fraud

"That will be grand," she said. "Let's start right away, Jimmie, as soon as I have helped Cousin Mira with the dishes."

"I don't want a mite of help," refused the housekeeper. "What's a few old dishes, I should like to know? My land o' Goshen, what's that? The house must be tumblin' down."

"It's only Satz," said Rhoda, rushing to save the screen door at which the dog was hurling himself in a fury of tumultuous yearning for his mistress. "I don't know whether he is just plain persistent or a true mechanical genius. No rope seems to hold him."

"It couldn't be the fault of the knot, could it?" asked Peter quizzically. "Girls aren't awfully strong at such things. Now I'll show you one that would have puzzled Houdini. I wasn't a Boy Scout for nothing. But why not let him come along? Want to go to ride, boy?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," shouted Satz in joyful yelps.

"Take the Buick," suggested Amos. "As long as Rhody'll be doin' the driving it had better be my fenders that gets dented." He winked broadly at Peter as the girl reached up and pulled his ear. "If you go out onto the North Road, stop by Joe Loomis's place and give him a message for me, will you, Sis?"

Gallant Fraud

"Of course. I'd like to. I haven't seen Millie and the baby for ages. What shall I tell Joe?"

"Just say no new developments in the case. Dicker-ing seems to of come to a standstill, but I'll let him know if there's any sign of their startin' up again. Well, so-long. Have a nice time. See you again around noon."

He clapped a battered hat onto his grizzled head and went out, pausing only to pat the dog and speak a few soothing words to him.

"Mebbe," said Cousin Mira, "you'll be passing Aunt Libby Balch's house, too. I reckon the poor critter could find use for a few of my fresh doughnuts."

"Bring 'em on," said Rhoda. "While we're on tour we ought not to miss Aunt Libby. She's one of our prize side shows, Jimmie. She lives all alone with something short of a million cats. When you walk up the lane to her house you feel as if you were having a bad dream. There's a cat under practically every bush and blade of grass, and they come crawling, crawling toward you with eyes like basilisks."

"You make my flesh creep," said Peter. "But if she's so hard up how can she feed such a menagerie?"

"Hard up? Oh, you're thinking of the way Cousin

Gallant Fraud

Mira spoke about the doughnuts. Aunt Libby isn't poor at all, not in that way. Of course nobody really knows how much money she has. She keeps to herself and doesn't talk about her affairs. But she's got a wonderful old house full of gorgeous antiques. People think she's a miser because she never parts with anything and dresses so queerly. She even wears her father's old coats and hats and she can't have bought a new dress for years and years."

"It stands to reason," contributed Mira, "Libby's not poor except in her own mind, for old Cap'n Balch died one o' the richest men in the county according to all reports. Still I always say she's more to be pitied than blamed. Her pa was a selfish old tyrant if there ever was one. All he thought of was his own comfort and that was at the bottom of his breaking off her love affair with Philip Ladd. Phil went off to the Spanish war and died of typhoid in camp. Libby wa'n't never the same afterward. For my part I must say if she takes comfort out of a passel of cats it ain't for us folks that have had happy lives to criticize."

Peter's ears had pricked as this recital started. Information was certainly coming in on every frequency this morning. Aunt Libby could be no other than the

Gallant Fraud

old lady who held the key to the stock transfer. It was luck indeed for him to get a crack at her the very first thing. Not that he could do anything so soon, but he could size her up and see where she was vulnerable.

"By all means let me have a look at Aunt Libby," he said, and to Satz, "How about it, old top? Want to go see the cats? In you go. No, no, back seat for you, I'm guest of honor today."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Rhoda, talking fast to cover a slight attack of diffidence now they were alone together for the first time since yesterday afternoon. "Since you seem so much interested in water power, I'll show you what the flood did to us three years ago. Of course you'd hardly know anything had happened now because the wreckage has been cleared up and even the fields where the silt was deposited are greened over again. But I can tell you all about it."

"Was it really so bad?"

"Oh, yes, terrible. It didn't come up around our place and Gramp's for you see our street is on an upper level, but all the houses down on the flats were flooded to the eaves, and people had to camp in the church and the school house just like refugees after

Gallant Fraud

we'd taken in as many as we could. If the dam had held the havoc wouldn't have been so great. You see the trouble comes mostly from the east fork of the river. At almost any excuse it comes down out of the mountains like a wildcat. It was bad again at the time of the hurricane and Gramp says it will always be a threat unless there is a good dam where the old one used to be."

"I see," said Peter.

"Oh, but you really couldn't imagine what it's like, just hearing about it. After we've made our calls, I'll drive up the road and show you where the east fork comes in. I suppose being a man you'll understand better than I do what causes the trouble."

At this point she broke off to wave a gay hand at the fourth or fifth pedestrian who had halted on one foot to gaze after them. "We won't stop now," she said, "but you'll have to begin meeting people pretty soon. They're all so interested to know Gramp has his wandering boy back again."

"Do you mean to tell me they know that—and so soon?"

"Why certainly. You don't suppose the news wouldn't have got around by this time, do you?"

Gallant Fraud

Peter groaned. "Seriously, Rhoda, I don't like this stunt a little bit. It makes me feel the yellowest sort of cur. What do you say we call it off? I can claim I've had a telegram calling me home. We can patch it up somehow and maybe get away with it."

"Oh, no, no, please don't do that." Her hands tightened on the wheel and her eyes implored him.

"But why not? I know Mr. Burnham has a sense of humor, but I doubt if he would like this particular joke. I'd like to keep his good opinion and I'm sure to lose it if he finds out. I can't go on indefinitely being Jimmie Brown."

"Oh, but can't you see? He's so awfully pleased to have you here. You heard what he said just now. You don't realize what it means to him after all the disappointment he's had over Jimmie." She checked herself quickly. After all this man was not of the family and she ought not to betray the weakness of her own flesh and blood to him. "You simply mustn't let Gramp down now," she insisted, and then added drearily, "Besides, if you did, you'd have to go right away."

"And you don't want me to go right away?"

She shook her head, eyes straight ahead and lip caught between teeth.

"Because of Gramp, or— Rhoda, are you speaking

Gallant Fraud

merely for Gramp, or do you want me here yourself? Draw over to the side of the road. There's nobody in sight and you and I have got to thrash this business out once and for all."

She obeyed. Indeed she could do nothing else safely, for her heart was pounding violently and a dazzling mist that had nothing to do with the atmosphere had spoiled the visibility. The curtain she had so deliberately dropped yesterday between her reason and her desire was rolling up with a vengeance, revealing to her starkly and baldly that her motive had not been in the least altruistic. She had made an excuse of Gramp, she was making another of him now. She had wanted Peter to come for herself then, and she wanted him to stay for her now, wanted him so she ached at the very thought of his going. Wanted him to touch her with those lean brown hands of his, wanted him to kiss her—not a cousinly kiss such as he had given her when he was playing Jimmie, but the kind with which Peter Belding would crush the lips of the woman he loved. The sudden recognition of what had happened to her was frightening.

"I—oh—I didn't—" She buried her crimson face in her hands.

Peter drew them down and took her into his arms.

Gallant Fraud

Presently he said, "Now we've got that settled we can go on to the next point."

"You mean you'll stay?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, I'm staying," he said grimly. "Heaven help me for the complete goop I am, but I'm staying. How would you expect me to get away when you've put me on the spot like this?"

"But, Peter, did you really want to get away?" The gold lights danced again in the eyes raised to his.

"There seems to be a pair of us," he answered, kissing her again. "Look out! Better drive on. There's a car coming and after all this is a public highway. Such cousinly enthusiasm might cause adverse comment."

She meshed the gears, and they spoke no further until the other motor had passed. After all, both of them were a bit shaken by the open admission of what they each had subconsciously known since the first minute, and Peter as well as Rhoda was a trifle frightened by the implications.

"I'm a good deal of a cad," he said ruefully. "I shouldn't have forced the issue so soon, but if you knew how much I've wanted to kiss you properly you'd be better able to forgive me."

"B-but, I don't need to forgive you," she stammered, "I—I—guess I've been wanting you to."

Gallant Fraud

"Darling! Don't go on being so sweet or I'll lose my head all over again. I haven't the right to make love to you in the circumstances. I mean I'm here under false pretenses—more false than even you know. Didn't I warn you not to take too much on faith?"

"And didn't I promise to be sensible whatever happened, Peter? I mean to keep my promise, truly. I won't ask you to tell me anything, not even who you are, until you do it of your own accord. You heard what Gramp said, 'the kind of grandson a man can be proud of.' I'd trust Gramp's judgment any time, and not only that but the way you're behaving is a proof of it."

Peter was terribly tempted to tell her everything. Uncle Henry's prohibition looked more idiotic than ever at the moment, nevertheless, his instructions were unequivocal. No one in East Joppa was to know he was a Hamilton employe. Uncle Henry was a stickler for the letter of his orders. Beyond that was the question of Rhoda herself. She had sweetness, beauty and charm, but had she discretion? This whole intrigue of hers was based on impulse. Better wait, he decided, until he knew her a little better.

While he fumbled for an answer she smiled disarmingly and added, "You really haven't any very dark

Gallant Fraud

secret, have you? There's no terrible confession pending? You aren't a gangster or anything, are you?"

He laughed in spite of himself. "Nothing half so terrible, I assure you. I was debating the wisdom of concealment."

"Don't, for I am quite keen to show you how noble I am and how lacking in horrid feminine curiosity. So now will you behave, Mr. Peter Belding?"

"I will, Miss Rhoda Burnham, but on condition you arrange ample time out in this game of Jimmie Brown—unless, that is, East Joppa looks tolerantly on romance between first cousins."

"Well—I wouldn't say it did, and I don't think New Englanders as a class believe much in love at first sight, either, so we'll have to walk softly. Oh, Jimmie—I suppose I'd better practice calling you Jimmie, or I'll slip up some time—Isn't it going to be grand fun?"

"Yeah," grunted Peter, "almost as much fun as cops and robbers. How old are you, kid?"

"Eighteen," gurgled Rhoda, "and sometimes I feel quite grown up. Anyhow I'm a smart girl. I bring 'em home alive. Haven't I trapped the largest composite specimen in captivity, one side Cousin Jimmie and the other Boy Friend Peter?"

Gallant Fraud

"Look out you don't get dizzy. Hey, hey, brake hard! Good Lord, I thought you were going to get that cat."

"And would it have been the limit if I had," cried Rhoda weak and breathless. "That was Aunt Libby's Boola. She thinks more of him than of all the other cats put together. I do hope she never knows, though perhaps I ought to warn her to keep him away from the road. We'll have to get out here anyway for the lane's so narrow and bumpy and the cats so thick it's risky to attempt it. No, no, Satz, you're to stay in the car. Stay, I said— Oh, good heavens to Betsey!"

Ersatz had wriggled through the crack and bolted past her up the lane.

"We've got to catch him," panted Rhoda.

"Let me," said Peter sprinting ahead.

Then they both stopped short, shaken with mirth.

Ersatz, though young, instinctively knew all there was to know about dealing with one cat, but even an older and more experienced dog than he would have been at a loss to handle the condition he now found himself confronting. From every quarter came a machine-gun fire of spits and hisses. He stopped dead in his tracks, stern dragging, head turning dizzily as

Gallant Fraud

creeping soft footed and unblinking, came gray cats and black cats, tiger striped and tortoise-shell tabbies, all transfixing him with a defiant stare. He shivered and whimpered, hesitated uncertainly, and then with a scream of agony and defeat, streaked back to the car as to sanctuary.

"I guess we won't have to worry about him again," said Peter weak with laughter. "I'd have been scared myself if I'd been in his hide. I thought you were drawing the long bow, sugar, when you described this place, but now I think you did quite a job of understatement. Aren't the creatures positively uncanny?"

"Yes, aren't they, but look, there comes Aunt Libby. Thank goodness she didn't see Satz. I don't want to upset her."

6



MOST of the cats, satisfied with having routed their enemy, slipped silently back into their coverts. A few of the more stoical, however, sat down on the late field of battle and began placidly to wash their faces, so it was that at the first glimpse Peter had of Aunt Libby Balch her progress was not unlike that of a gaunt sibyl along an avenue of befurred sphinxes, especially as the huge orange Tom Rhoda had called Boola marched before her, tail in air, like a small, haughty man-at-arms.

"By Jove," whispered Peter, "is this real or am I seeing things?"

"Shhh," cautioned Rhoda. "She's really very nice, a lady and quite well educated. Just act as if you liked cats and you'll get on beautifully with her."

"Hello, Aunt Libby," she called, "it's I, Rhoda Burnham. I've brought you a bag of doughnuts and a caller and I hope you're going to like both."

Gallant Fraud

Over the weatherbeaten, austere face broke a most unexpectedly warm and pleasant smile. The voice that answered the girl's greeting was also incongruously out of place coming from the ropy throat of the tall, spare figure clad above a long trailing calico skirt in a man's coat and a square crowned derby hat of ancient vintage. The hand which reached out to take Rhoda's showed in spite of age and hard usage that it must once have been beautiful, for it was still fine and almost daintily well cared for.

"Why, child," said Aunt Libby in that oddly musical deep voice, "you're a sight for sore eyes. Your grandpa never said a word about your being at home."

"I've only been back two days," said Rhoda. "He wouldn't have been here since."

"Neither he nor the others," said Miss Balch, cryptically as far as Rhoda was concerned. "He didn't send you here to get anything, did he?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why, no," replied Rhoda puzzled. "I don't think Gramp even knew I was coming. It was Cousin Mira suggested I stop by and give you these doughnuts, and I thought you might like to meet Jimmie. You remember about Jimmie Brown, Uncle Frank's son who lives out west?"

Gallant Fraud

"Humph, yes," returned Aunt Libby more graciously, "I do recollect there was a boy, now you speak of it. These doughnuts certainly do look good. I haven't had a bite of pastry this long time, and Mira's fried cakes always were famous. Is that your cousin? Look out for your eyes, young man. Boola isn't used to visitors."

Taking Rhoda's suggestion seriously, Peter had stooped and was making friendly advances to the great yellow cat. His head was bent low and the warning might not have been amiss had it not been that Boola was taking his attentions in anything but the predicted spirit of antagonism. Instead the creature had paced cautiously forward and was sniffing at Peter's hand, then continued to stand immobile while the latter's fingers gently scratched him under his chin and on upward behind his ear.

"My soul's alive," said Aunt Libby, "I don't know what's come over the cat! He never let any man do that to him before!"

They watched intently. Boola's broad paws were beginning to weave gently and presently a deep rumble boiled up from his throat. Peter dropped to one knee against which Boola immediately rubbed, then, rearing himself on his hind legs, pushed the top of his

Gallant Fraud

golden head under the young man's chin. Finally with the exquisite muscular coordination inherent in cats, he leaped to Peter's shoulder, balancing himself there and regarding his mistress and Rhoda with a fixed gaze both haughty and complacent.

"Well, I never!" said Aunt Libby.

Peter smiled and concentrated on getting up again on both feet without destroying the animal's equilibrium. This accomplished, he walked forward cautiously and held out his hand.

"Do you mind if I don't take my hat off, Miss Balch?" he asked. "Boola's leaning on it and I don't want to disturb him. He's a magnificent creature. I don't wonder you think a lot of him."

Aunt Libby laid her fine, wrinkled hand in Peter's. She was a tall woman, but she still had to look up to meet his eyes. For a minute she stood with her head tilted back, searching his face. Then over her own crept a change so illuminating it was to haunt both young people for a long time after. The change passed, however, as quickly as it had come, and the old woman's voice was thickened by emotion when she spoke.

"Who did you say he is?"

Rhoda's own throat felt constricted and dry. "He's

Gallant Fraud

Jimmie," she said. "My cousin, Jimmie Brown, Uncle Frank's son that was born during the war, don't you remember?"

"The war," repeated Aunt Libby, "the terrible war. People died in the war. Why did we have to fight with Spain?"

"Not the Spanish war, Aunt Libby," prompted Rhoda. "Uncle Frank was in the World War, don't you remember? The war for Cuba was over long, long before Jimmie was born."

It was impossible to tell whether the old woman even heard this. She was peering again into Peter's face, scanning it as if searching out some vital record. Meantime the cat settled more firmly on the young man's shoulder, tucking soft paws under a downy breast.

"No," said Aunt Libby at last, when the tension was getting almost unbearable, "oh, no. You may call him Jimmie Brown. Amos Burnham may believe he's his grandson. But he isn't." Her voice was dreamy like that of one in a trance.

Rhoda and Peter gazed at each other thunderstruck. Each read in the other's eyes the counterpart of his own fears. Of all the miserable mischances this was the worst, that they should run into the unmasking of

Gallant Fraud

their secret the very first thing. Who would have imagined it could have happened here of all places? What did, what could Aunt Libby Balch know about Peter, unless she was, as some people liked to pretend they thought her, something of a witch?

"B—but," began Rhoda.

Aunt Libby silenced her with a wave of the hand. "No indeed, he isn't," she said in a much more normal voice. "But I know who he is, and so does Boola, don't you, Boola?"

"Ye-ow," said Boola, cuddling more closely against Peter's ear.

"See!" said Aunt Libby. "Come with me into the house and I'll give you more proof."

Without waiting to see if they followed, she went almost at a run up the lane.

"Shall we go?" quavered Rhoda. "Peter, I had no idea I was letting you in for anything like this. I never knew her to be so queer and I can't imagine what she thinks she knows about you."

"Nor I, but I'm going to find out. Be a sport, Rhoda. She can't hurt us. She's a gentlewoman for all her peculiarities, and I think she is glad to have us here."

"It gives me the creeps. Oh, I wish you hadn't tried to make up to the cat."

Gallant Fraud

"The cat angle is curious, isn't it? And the creature's name is about as funny. How would anybody like Aunt Libby ever choose Boola as a name for a pet?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's all perfectly mad. But we'd better go find out. See, she's waving us to hurry. Let's get it over as quickly as possible and then scam out before anything else comes up."

"What's the inside of the house like? A mess?"

"Oh, no, really lovely. You must have seen she's immaculate for all her awful get-up."

"That's something. Do you suppose I'd insult some divinity if I lifted Boola down. I'm getting a crick in my neck."

Boola answered this question for himself by springing lightly to the ground and mounting the steps ahead of them in his finest chief-usher manner. In another moment they were in a dim hallway and Aunt Libby was leading them toward an enormous living room. Peter saw at a glance Rhoda had not exaggerated. The room was beautiful in proportion and although its furnishings were preponderantly Victorian even these had been wisely chosen for comfort instead of ornament and hence lacked most of the tasteless trimming of their period. There was, besides, a saving background of really fine old pieces. Peter knew little of

Gallant Fraud

antiques, but last year Kay had been going strong for them and had dragged him through a dozen shops in search of bargains. He had learned enough to tell at a glance that here were treasures. He gave an involuntary exclamation of pleasure and smiled at his hostess only to find her watching him with an expression he could interpret as little short of suspense.

What could she be expecting him to say? He hoped he would be able to hit on the right thing for obviously it was going to mean much to her, yet only the most banal remarks came to his tongue.

Rhoda seemed to sense his embarrassment for she threw herself into the breach. "I told Jimmie you had a wonderful home, Aunt Libby. I hoped you'd let him see it for himself."

"Yes," fumbled Peter, "it certainly is fine. I didn't suppose you had kept everything like this—so exactly the way it used to be, I mean."

It was as if the old woman had been waiting for those precise words. A sort of faded radiance swept the shadow of the years from her face. "No, nothing has changed," she said happily, "I've kept everything so you'd remember when you came back. Didn't I say you'd know as soon as you saw?"

Gallant Fraud

Peter hoped he never again in his life would feel more uncertain of himself than he did at that moment. He was utterly at sea, but he had vowed to go through with this and he would, not merely because he was by this time unbearably curious, but because there was something about this strange old woman that appealed to his sympathy. The whole business might be weird to Rhoda and to him, but Aunt Libby was actually uplifted by it. It struck him she had probably had very little happiness in her life, and contributing to her harmless foible could cost him little enough compared with the pleasure it brought her.

"What I chiefly know is that it is very kind of you to show me your treasures," he said cordially. "A good many people would envy me. May I look at that perfect Governor Winthrop desk? It has a secret drawer, hasn't it?" He was glad he knew that much about something in the room, that is, he hoped he knew it. The desk was practically a replica of the one Kay had thrown a fit about, and he'd been intrigued by the secret drawer himself.

His luck was holding, for Aunt Libby laughed delightedly, a laugh that was strangely reminiscent of a lost girlhood.

Gallant Fraud

"Oh, I knew, I knew, you'd remember," she said again. "I'll show you what I keep there. You, too, Rhoda child. You didn't believe me, but you'll trust the evidence of your own eyes."

Her look was no longer bemused, but clear as an excited child's.

She urged them toward the desk, opened it, and searching expertly with her long fingers, released a hidden spring. A molding swung aside to show a narrow orifice.

Rhoda leaned against Peter's shoulder for confidence, and he caught her hand and held it tight, while Aunt Libby drew out a thin packet and spread the contents on the satin smoothness of the desk lid. There were a few yellowing letters, two cabinet photographs that must have been taken in the nineties, and half a dozen badly faded snapshots.

"See," said the old woman thrusting one of the photographs into Peter's hand, "now you know why I recognized you the minute you smiled at me."

Peter examined the picture minutely. Like any other youth of 1940, he found it hard to look beneath the surface fashion of a former century and recognize the eternal human quantity. Even so, there was something

Gallant Fraud

vaguely familiar about the face of the stiffly starched young man of the portrait, his queer collar and grotesquely waxed moustache notwithstanding, as it looked self-consciously out of the mildewed glaze. It was Rhoda who first realized why this should be.

"P—I mean Jimmie," she squeaked excitedly, "he looks like you. The way you would look, that is, if you made yourself up for a gay nineties masquerade. Oh, Aunt Libby, I see exactly what you mean now, but who is he—was he, that is? Was he your—your—Was he Mr. Ladd?"

"Yes," said Miss Balch, taking the photograph into her own hand again and holding it tenderly, "he was. I guess there isn't anybody doesn't know about us. Such stories don't die out in a place like East Joppa until all the folks they concern die too. He was Philip Ladd, the man I might have married. Maybe it seems funny to you he would want to marry the likes of me, but I wasn't always what I am now. I was like this when—when—" Her voice died away as she lifted the other picture and gave it to the girl.

"You were lovely, Aunt Libby," said Rhoda softly after a minute's silent inspection. "Are the snapshots of you, too?"

Gallant Fraud

"Some of them, and some of Phil. In a way I like them better than these."

She sounded perfectly sane now, and the young people were honestly interested. They bent over the pictures eagerly.

"Oh, here you are again," said Rhoda, "and weren't you sweet. This one of Philip looks a lot more like Jimmie, don't you think? But I'm awfully glad men don't wear funny moustaches any more."

"They were very stylish at that time," said Aunt Libby a little hurt, "and Philip's was unusually fine."

"Indeed it was," Rhoda hastened to agree. "Oh, look, here's Boola. It couldn't have been Boola, though, could it, so long ago?"

Aunt Libby leaned over to look. "Not this Boola," she said. "That's the first one. I've always had a Boola ever since, but this one Philip named for the song they used to sing at his college."

"Ah," said Peter enlightened. "Mr. Ladd was a Yale man?"

"Yes. He was a great student. I used to be afraid he wouldn't want anybody as ignorant as me after he went away and got educated. Not that I didn't try to read and not be too stupid for him. But he was won-

Gallant Fraud

derful about it. He always said he'd rather talk to me any time than to a lot of bluestockings. He used to tell me all sorts of interesting things, especially about the eastern religions he liked so much. He said he was more than half convinced men's souls came back in other bodies, even in those of the animals. He said it was wrong to kill the animals because you never could tell." Her eyes were taking on that peculiar mystic look again, and Rhoda drew a little closer to Peter. He put his arm around her reassuringly.

"Then he went away," continued the old woman. "He went away and never came back again. It wasn't his fault. He wrote and told me he would when the war was over in spite of—of anything. But the war killed him, so I knew that when he did come back it would have to be in a different way. I've waited. Sometimes I've about given up hope, but you've come at last, Philip."

She laid her hand on Peter's sleeve and stroked it. Then as suddenly as it had flared, the mystic light faded from her face, and she spoke quite sanely.

"Don't be afraid of me," she said. "I'm an old, old woman, and you've come back young. I know it can't be the same as it used to be. You're more like the son

Gallant Fraud

we never had. You'll let me think of you that way, won't you, dear? You won't go away again?"

She raised a pleading face and on a swift impulse Peter bent and kissed her withered cheek. "I'm proud to have you feel like that about me," he said a little thickly, "and I shall come again to see you."

At last they were out of the house and down the lane, Aunt Libby waving from the doorway until they were out of her sight.

"Whew," said Peter, as soon as he was sure she could not hear him, "if I get one more personality thrust upon me I'm going in for character acting on a paying basis. I ought to go big in Hollywood."

"You were terribly sweet to her, darling," said Rhoda. "I nearly disgraced myself by bursting into tears when you kissed her."

"I was only decent. I can't claim a bit of credit for I honestly like her. She's pretty fine as well as very pathetic, if you ask me. Only a brute would have told her it was all an hallucination."

"Do you suppose there could possibly be anything in her theory?" asked Rhoda half credulously. "Lots of people do believe that sort of thing, don't they? And you certainly do look like that picture."

Gallant Fraud

Peter snorted. "I hate to disillusion you, Beautiful, but the fact is I'm a fairly ordinary type and so was that guy. Any fellow with a pan like mine could make up in a four inch dickey and a handlebar moustache and be the spitting image of the late lamented, so don't let your imagination get to doing things. As for the Karma idea, I won't pretend to give an opinion. Better men than I have failed to crack that particularly tough nut."

"You promised to come back to see her."

"Of course I did. I can't let the poor old thing down. It's real to her, fantastic as it is to us. And now listen, dear. Let's keep this whole business under our hat. It may crowd all the other tricks we're hoarding there, but I guess we can make room for it."

"Yes," nodded the girl, "we must. If it got around, people would say she's insane. I suppose in a way she is, at that."

"Well, I can't see that she's any more so now than she probably has been for the last forty years, and nobody has made any rumpus. She certainly won't be any worse for what we may do for her. I'm glad it's over for today anyhow. Let's get away as fast as we can. What's the next port of call?"

Gallant Fraud

"The Loomis place. You remember Gramp gave me a message for Joe."

"Umm, so he did. Here's hoping Joe doesn't mistake me for Napoleon or Harold Ickes."

"Or Dopey," giggled Rhoda. "Aw, Peter Belding, be yourself."

"Peter Belding!" groaned Peter. But allowing for the margin of error, he managed to be himself quite thoroughly for the next few seconds.

7



I DON'T have to tell you this is what we call the river road," said Rhoda some time later as they swung north between wide green meadows edging the stream, and upland pastures rising on their other hand in gentle terraces to the shade of maple groves. At intervals along the road itself, set in narrow front dooryards, nestled white farmhouses with the sun on their faces, cheerfully oblivious of the scars of their age as hearty octogenarians basking serenely in the warmth of one more goodly summer. From the lower fields where the grass already stood deep came the click and whir of mowing machines softened by distance. The drifting scent of new cut hay blended with the fragrance of young June growth and the ammoniac tang of the farmyards came in soft waves on lightly moving air. In trees and bushes mating birds bustled and chattered, bursting into gay cadenzas from pent up ecstasy. Peace

Gallant Fraud

brooded over the whole quietly smiling country, from the hill slope to the narrow, tranquil river, flowing placidly between low banks.

"No," said Peter, "it seems to be a self-evident fact. But do you mean to tell me that tame looking trickle of water ever produced a flood? Why, it's hardly more than a good sized brook."

"I know it must seem like a fairy story to you, but it actually does. Of course not every year and not often anything like as bad as it has these last few springs and falls. I don't understand all the talk of flood control myself, but they say it has something to do with the loss of the dam. Gramp can tell you all about it if you're really interested. All I know is that twice in the last three years that stodgy old plug of a river has climbed out of its banks and gone all over the meadows and up across this road."

"Did it reach any of the houses?"

"Most of them as you see are on the hill slope, far enough up to be out of reach, but Joe Loomis lost his big barn because it was on the lower side of the road. He's built his new one on the hill back of the house as you'll see in a minute when we get around this bend. There!"

Gallant Fraud

"Ah!" exclaimed Peter as she slowed down the better for him to take in the scene. "That's exactly my idea of what a Vermont farm should look like. Friend Joseph goes in for dairying, I take it."

"It is nice, isn't it? Yes, Joe went to agricultural college and he runs things in model shape. Look, I think that is he on that hay wagon."

She touched her horn and leaned out to wave. In another moment they had stopped at the foot of the lane which led past the house toward the barn.

The man in the empty hay rack stopped his horses and clambered down, leaving the beasts to snatch a welcome rest in the shade of the big dooryard maple. He started forward to meet the newcomers.

At a distance his tall, lank figure did not so much stoop as give a peculiar illusion of drooping. Not until he was quite near did Peter realize almost with a start of surprise that this man was young, not more than three or four years older than himself, he would have said. The lankness, too, he realized now he could see Joe more clearly, was by no means indicative of weakness. The man was lean, but his leanness had the supple toughness of an Indian. The droop of his shoulders was not the result of physical laxness. Rather, Peter

Gallant Fraud

surmised, it was the logical accompaniment of the shadow lurking in the deepset eyes and all the rest of the somber expression that overlay the rugged, deeply tanned features.

Shadow and droop both lightened as the young farmer recognized his visitor. "Why, hello, Rhoda," he exclaimed, shaking vigorously the small hand she put into his big tanned one. "I thought that looked like Mr. Burnham's Buick, but I didn't know you were home yet. Millie'll be tickled pink to see you."

"Hello yourself, Joe," responded Rhoda briskly. "Yes, I'm here again, and Millie has nothing on me. I'll go in presently. I suppose young Joe has got so big I won't be able to recognize him."

"Yes, Joey's quite a lad. Fifteen months old next Saturday."

"It doesn't seem possible. Oh, Joe, this is my cousin, Jimmie Brown. You know—the one from out west. He's on for a little visit with Gramp."

"You don't say? Pleased to meet you, Mr. Brown." Loomis extended a cordial hand. "We've all hoped you'd give East Joppa a call one of these days. Now you've found out what a swell family you've got here, it won't be so long before you come again."

Gallant Fraud

"You're quite right," responded Peter heartily. "This is a fine place you've got here, Mr. Loomis. I was just admiring it when we caught sight of you."

Joe nodded and instantly the droop settled over him once more. "Yes," he answered, "it's good. To me it's the best place in the whole world. I guess that's because I was born and raised here, like my father and my grandfather were before me. We've all put something of ourselves into this land while we've been drawing a living out of it. I guess a city fellow like you can't understand how a countryman would get to feel that way."

"I'm beginning to use my imagination," said Peter.

"Do show him your dairy," said Rhoda, "while I'm visiting with Millie. Oh, by the way, Gramp sent you a message. He said to tell you nothing much was stirring, but he'd let you know when business started again. Oh, dear, that doesn't sound right. I must have listened with only half an ear. Do you remember any more exactly, Jimmie?"

"You got the gist of it. Business is at a sort of stalemate, as I understood it. Nothing to do but sit still and wait developments." Peter watched his host's reaction to this statement with curiosity. Joe seemed actually to

Gallant Fraud

sag, not so much physically as spiritually. A minute ago his face had been that of a man in his late twenties, now it had taken on an indeterminate weight of years. His voice, too, had lost its pleasant ring. He spoke almost bitterly.

"Well, that's that," he said. "I suppose I ought to be thankful for every month's reprieve I get, especially at this time of year, but it's the awful suspense that eats into a man. Yes, you go along in, Rhoda. There's Millie at the door now. She must have seen you drive up. Don't say anything to her about what I just said, though. No need for her to do the worrying."

"Oh, all right," said Rhoda, looking puzzled. "As a matter of fact, Joe, I don't know what it's all about myself."

"Just as well," said Joe.

The two young men waited a trifle awkwardly until she was out of hearing, then Peter said, "I don't either but I've heard enough to put two and two together Loomis. Are you going to be affected by this deal with the Hamilton Mills? Would you have any serious objection to telling me about it?"

Joe answered slowly, almost hesitantly. "Well, guess there's no great secret about it, except that don't relish having my troubles broadcast all over th

Gallant Fraud

county, but you aren't likely to do that. Besides, your grandfather will likely tell you. He's been mighty good looking out for my interests and all. You've heard him say anything?"

"Only that the paper mill property is up for sale and this Hamilton company is interested. I gathered the site of the dam is the debatable point, but as this is my first day in East Joppa I naturally don't know much about the matter."

"Let's walk up to the barns," said Joe. "I'll send a boy to tend to the horses."

"Sure I'm not taking too much of your time?"

"No, I'm not needed. We aren't doing the heavy cutting yet, but the weather's been so good some stands have come along early. To tell the truth I'm glad to have somebody to talk to. I try not to bother Millie. She's none too strong and the baby's quite a load in addition to her own work now he's at the toddling stage and getting into things. She's bound to hear enough of it one of these days, but she'll be spared a few weeks of worry."

"I'll be discreet," promised Peter, "and as I'm all in the family whatever Grandfather wants kept quiet is sacred to me."

"Yes," replied Joe. "That's the way I sized you up."

Gallant Fraud

Well, I told you this farm has been owned by Loomises for over a hundred years. It's a good place as you can see, but like a lot of the New England farms it isn't geared to the modern market. Maintenance for the farmer perhaps, but no surplus. The only way a farm like this can be made to pay nowadays is through the dairy. Maybe Rhoda told you that's the way I'm trying to run it."

"She did and that you're taking it up scientifically."

"Within my means. I've got a decent herd and with a little luck I'll have a better. But my luck's out."

"You lost your barn in the flood?"

Joe nodded. "In other circumstances that might not have been unmixed misfortune. The old building was small and out of date. To be sure I've run into debt putting up the new one, but it improves my chances so much I'd be pretty cheerful about carrying the extra load if it weren't that now it looks as if all my work had gone for nothing and that I'd have to pull up stakes and start all over somewheres else."

Peter listened in sympathetic silence for the man now he had started needed no prompting.

"It isn't entirely that I won't get what the place is worth if they force me to sell," he continued, "though

Gallant Fraud

it stands to reason a big, impersonal concern like Hamilton's isn't out to pay a cent more than the law makes 'em. Even if I got dollar for dollar what my folks and I have put into it, there's nothing can make up for the loss of land we Loomises have worked for three generations, land I thought my own son would farm after me. More'n that, it's the idea it's been taken away from me."

"Taken away?"

"Sure. If they put the dam where they plan to—where that snake Rogers that's managing the Barrows estate has worked 'em around into believing it ought to go, all the bottom lands from the bend up along and beyond the next two farms will be under water."

"But you'll still have your pastures."

"A few acres of rocky hillside and scrub and some woodland that will take time to clear. All the fertile meadows where I raise my hay and fodder corn will be gone. I couldn't make a go of it. I'd have to cut down my herd and heaven knows if I could manage to feed even a few head and pay off on my mortgage besides."

"I see," said Peter.

"You don't see all even yet. The new mills would be

Gallant Fraud

just down the road, and where the mills are the operatives will have to find housing. I'm a plain man and no snob, but their ways aren't our ways and maybe it's all prejudice but I favor our own. Their coming will mean a different kind of life in the valley, perhaps in this very house where my folks have been born and have died. Maybe I'm just being sentimental, but I hate to think of it."

"That's quite understandable. But what about this alternate plan of rebuilding the old dam and locating the new mills up river?"

"Well, now you've got something. A big new dam between here and the east fork would not only leave us our farms, but would actually be protection. With the dam already built and the cost to the government cut to a minimum, there's not much question but we could get the state to handle the reservoir proposition. Mr. Burnham's got considerable political influence. There's a location north of the old factory that's a natural for the project, besides. But what's the use? It would take a lot more money to build up there and likely more for operating. You don't see big business looking at such an alternative from a humanitarian angle, do you? It isn't done."

"It might be, though. I'm not persuaded all the hu-

Gallant Fraud

manitarians are in the Federal Administration. I even doubt if Wendell Willkie is *sui generis*. What do you actually know about the Hamiltons?"

"Nothing," admitted Joe, "except that they seem to be dealing with Rogers pretty exclusively."

"Then why not lay your case before them? You might be surprised to find they aren't altogether hard-boiled. Besides, your farm isn't the only one affected."

"I'm the only one that would stand out. Old Mr. Hunter next north is past working his own place. I've leased a good part of it this two years. I guess he'd be relieved to get what they'd give him so he could go to Bennetsville where his daughters live. The Hendersons are newcomers, and Rogers has got them sewed up. No, I'm the only obstructionist—what Rogers calls an enemy of progress."

"Or its victim," amended Peter. "Thanks for explaining it to me, Loomis. You've cleared up several points. You really ought to have laid your case before the Hamiltons. They probably don't understand how you feel."

"Or care," gloomed Joe, though his face was a little less furrowed. "I wish I could believe you are right, though."

"You may come to it," said Peter, "but now show

Gallant Fraud

me the stock and then I want to meet your wife and that famous son and heir."

It was getting on toward noon when the two young men, by this time on an easy footing of friendship, finally reached the house.

"So you're Jimmie," said Millie, raising a pretty but too pale face to Peter and smiling in a way that only emphasized the faint hollows in her cheeks. "Do you know, as the mysterious lost cousin, you've always been quite a thrill to Rhoda's schoolmates? I'm not altogether sure we haven't thought she made you up, so it's a real experience to meet you."

"That's nothing to what being met is to me," laughed Peter. "So this is the young man, is it?" He held out a hand to the handsome brown-eyed baby peering from behind his mother's skirt. "Say, fellow, you aren't going to be the only member of the family to turn me down! I thought not! That's the boy." Little Joe had dived toward him and crowed with delight as Peter swung him to his shoulder.

"But that's wonderful," exclaimed Millie. "Joey almost never takes to strangers at first. Even Rhoda had to coax."

"Indeed I did," said Rhoda, "but leave it to Jimmie

Gallant Fraud

to mow 'em down, dogs, cats or babies. I begin to wonder if there isn't something actually likable about the lad."

"I'll say there is," chimed in Joe. "Now how about it, Mil, can't we manage to keep these folks to dinner?"

"I've been trying to make Rhoda think so," answered his wife, "but she won't."

"Jimmie'll tell you he promised Gramp we'd be home," prompted Rhoda.

"That's so," Peter took the cue, "but if you'll make it a standing invitation—I'd like to know a lot more about this family."

"Ditto for the family," said Joe taking the reluctant youngster from his new friend. "You can't come too often to suit us."

"I'm so glad you like Joe and Millie," said Rhoda as they waved good-bye to the little group by the gate. "They're representative of the very best in the valley. Typical old Vermont stock that hasn't let itself run out. I thought Joe was looking quite down in the mouth though when we first got there. You seem to have perked him up amazingly. Did he tell you what he's worrying over?"

"Something about flood control," evaded Peter. "I'm

Gallant Fraud

getting much interested in it after all I've heard. Have we time to see where the old dam was?"

"If we hurry. It's about five miles up the road, but if we are late to dinner Cousin Mira's bark will be worse than her bite, so let's go. But Peter, you look positively furrowed by care! What's the old dam to you?"

Peter laughed. "Now you're asking me," he said. "Yes, you're asking me—Elsa."

8



LATE in the evening of that same day, Essie, yawning and unscrewing a dropsical synthetic pearl from her earlobe said, "Well, and what did you think of our famous Cousin Jimmie, Urse?"

Urson pulled off his tie and tossed it onto the dresser where the important part of it fell as a matter of course into an open jar of facial cream. "Blast!" he replied. "Why can't you keep the tops on your confounded pots? There's another tie gone west. Oh, I don't know. I guess he's good enough."

"Why don't you look where you throw things?" countered Essie as a matter of routine, "I never did like that tie anyhow. Well, I think he's simply too good looking for words, I mean fascinating, if you want to know, and I'll bet he's absolutely rolling."

"Hah!" snorted Urson, hurling his shirt at a chair on which it collapsed trailing a sleeve on the dusty carpet.

Gallant Fraud

He lit a cigarette with a vicious jerk of his wrist and went pawing savagely for his pajamas in the overcrowded cupboard. "Yes, that's about what you would think," he continued. "It might interest you to know you made a nice spectacle of yourself. He's probably onto exactly what you were planning. Where the devil are my pajamas? That was the last decent pair I've got."

"Then you'll have to take next best," said Essie indifferently. "Picklepuss took them to wash and hasn't brought them back. Look in the bottom drawer. Maybe there are some among that junk. And when it comes to making spectacles you'd better look to home. You sat and glowered like a sulky baboon all evening. One of us had to act as if all the power lines hadn't failed."

"If it's any satisfaction to you to know it, you certainly proved they hadn't. What I mean is you'd have done us a lot more good if you hadn't used current enough to stand his hair on end. And let me tell you, you didn't improve your stock with Gramp or Cousin Mira. How many times do I have to tell you my family isn't used to the manners of—of your sort? If you had the sense you were born with you'd try to please them,

Gallant Fraud

then we'd stand some chance of getting something out of them."

Essie flared back, "That'll be enough from you, Urson Burnham. I'd like to know what right you have to set yourself and your folks up over me and mine. Why if it hadn't been for you, I'd be having a darned sight better time than I am now. I could have—" The rest of her remark was muffled by the dress she tugged over her head. She swore under cover as a seam ripped.

"Huh!" grunted Urson bitterly. "I wish to God you had. Not that it makes much difference in what you do."

"What's that?" demanded Essie sharply, emerging from the folds of the frock.

"Nothing," morosely, "but now you listen to me. I stand for a lot from you, but there's going to be no monkey business with Jimmie. You let him alone, you hear? Not that I care a hang what happens to the poor sap himself, but you can see with half an eye the old man's sold on him. It would be that way, of course. The prodigal always gets the breaks."

"The who?" inquired Essie. "Why can't you talk American?"

"Okay, toots. I mean Gramp is like every other old

Gallant Fraud

fool. The wandering lad sweeps clean with him, like the well-known new broom. That's why we've got to play our cards absolutely right, or the glamour boy will walk off with the lion's share of the property in the end. You'd like that fine, wouldn't you?"

"Aren't you forgetting your precious sister's got the jump on you already? It makes me sick the way she purrs around your grandfather, and sicker the way he laps it up. She's making eyes at Jim, too, but I doubt if he's the kind to fall for the Shirley Temple line."

"You can leave Rhoda out of this too," said Urson between his teeth. "I know how to put her in her place. What you want to remember is that boy's been around. He can recognize Mae West as quick or quicker than he will Shirley. Listen, Ess, let's stop fighting and get down to business. If he's got money we've got to cultivate him, but it's no use going at it the wrong way. I hate his insides as bad as you do, but letting him get any sort of a wrong impression isn't going to pry his pocketbook open."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Burnham," replied Essie suavely, slipping a wisp of nightgown over her satin shoulders and stretching with a languorous yawn against her pillow. "I told you before. I don't hate

Gallant Fraud

either his insides or his outs. I think he's quite nice, and a lot better looking than you were even when I married you. Do you know, you've rather gone off that way lately, old dear."

Urson wadded up another ragged pajama top and hurled it into a corner. He switched off the light and flung himself into bed. "It's a wonder I haven't gone a lot further," he growled. "I got another big bill from Fulton today. I thought I told you last time ——"

"You haven't opened the window," said Essie. "Ho-hum, you're always telling me, but I should worry. You always seem to pay."

"Pay! Of course I pay! If I didn't manage to somehow they'd go to the old man and then what? But there's a limit to what I can get hold of and right now I've reached it. Alvord says you've been looking at cars again."

"What of it? We need a new one, don't we? The old Chev's a disgrace."

"I suppose that's why you've been making use of Len Jackson's Cadillac so much lately," retorted Urson. "All right, all right. It's nothing to me. Run around with any confounded jitterbug you choose, but don't expect me to go on paying upkeep bills."

Gallant Fraud

"I get sleepy when anything hums in my ears," said Essie. "When you have anything to say that interests me, wake me up."

In a distant corner of the house Rhoda was lying awake in the dark. Sleep promised to be a long way off, but she didn't mind. There was so much to think about, so much that was very strange but very sweet. Just a little troubling, too. The crowded day that had started with the exciting miracle of Peter's presence had ended in the ecstasy of love. Between lay Gramp's delight in his substitute grandson, the weird experience at Aunt Libby's, the friendly visit with Joe and Millie Loomis and the whole-hearted acceptance of Jimmie Brown by the villagers who had met him. But there had also been the evening which had revealed Urson in one of his worst moods, and shown Essie with embarrassing frankness for the cheap bit of fluff she was.

What must Peter have thought? Whatever it was it had not changed him to her, for there had been the slow walk home afterward through the warm starlit night, and Peter's arms around her, Peter's kisses on her lips. She moved her head on her pillow, feeling again in imagination how it had fitted the hollow of his

Gallant Fraud

shoulder; and her breath caught and fluttered. Peter, Peter darling! Why had she never suspected it would feel like this to be in love?

And yet what did she know of this man she had never heard of forty-eight hours ago? She trusted Peter. Of course she trusted him, for if you loved a person it had to follow you had faith in him. Still, she had so little to go on. All she could be sure of was that his name was Peter Belding and that he came from Wisconsin. Oh, dear! Now that was starting all over, spoiling something that in itself was so perfect.

Peter had really been terribly honest, much more honest than she. She was the one that had proposed passing him off for Jimmie. He had said he didn't like that sort of thing. Wasn't that ample enough proof he was honorable? And tonight what was it he had said?

"Darling, we've certainly got ourselves into a funny jam, but I believe it will all come out right. Can you play the game till I am free? I don't think it will be so very long."

How easy it had seemed to say yes with his arms holding her and his breath in her hair. Silly for her not to find it just as easy now. Peter, Peter, my sweet.

Peter had not gone straight back to Gramp's after

Gallant Fraud

saying good night to Rhoda. He had walked slowly the whole length of the street and back again, thinking hard, the end of his cigarette glowing like a tiny red star in the shadow of overarching elms and maples, its smoke mingling with the night fragrance of rambler roses and syringa. There was no one else astir at that hour in the quiet village, though lights still burned in some of the houses, blinking from the first to the second stories and then out, like the soft closing of sleepy eyes. East Joppa was going to bed decorously early.

Like Rhoda he was feeling the day to have been amazing, but for him the heady draught of first love had been offset not so much by doubt as by a very steadying chaser of personal responsibility. Love, he was well aware, had come to him in a new form which he recognized as at once finer and more enduring than the casual flames he had previously called by that name. In addition to that, however, he had experienced an abrupt new widening of his human sympathies. As yet he did not guess that one was the corollary of the other, but he did realize soberly that the happiness of Joe Loomis and of poor heart-hungry Aunt Libby, as well as the safety of the peaceful valley had been

Gallant Fraud

laid in his hands. And he knew he must not fail them. In serving them he felt more than certain he could make up to Amos Burnham for the harmless deception played upon him. How he was going to do all this he did not yet know, but he was catching brief flashes of inspiration. These flashes had prompted him to say to Rhoda, "I believe it will come right. Can you play the game until I am free?"

No, it wouldn't be long. He'd have to make his report to Uncle Henry. More than one report, probably, before he convinced him. Then Uncle Henry would want an engineer's report and another on shipping facilities. The final decision wouldn't be Peter's, but he felt certain his opinion would have weight enough to turn the balance. Meantime, it would be quite as well for Rhoda and him to wait to let the family know about their love. As she herself had said, New Englanders weren't altogether sold on the value or propriety of love at first sight. That Amos liked him was an undoubted fact, but how he would look upon a too swift wooing of his precious grandchild, even by an authentic Jimmie Brown was another story. Then there was this sulky, handsome Urson, obviously jealous of his long lost cousin, and embarrassed by the

Gallant Fraud

blatant machinations of his tawdry pink and gold Woolworth angel. And Essie—maybe in East Joppa you wouldn't mention what she all too evidently was. Urson, Peter suspected, was anything but a saint, but he doubted if he was cheap or coarse fundamentally. There was something funny about that marriage. Without realizing it, Peter was rapidly acquiring a decided taste for playing god from the machine. He had scented another chance for sticking his finger into human relations. He was going to find out more about this less happy part of Rhoda's family background.

Revolving all this in his mind, he forgot entirely that to Rhoda he himself was practically an unknown quantity. Had he remembered, though, it might have been the sweet flattery of her faith would have blunted his conscience to the desirability of setting her doubts at rest.

When he reached the home gate a dim light was burning in the hall. Otherwise the house was dark—a friendly, trustful darkness that would have shamed a more guileful guest. To Peter it brought new resolution. Amos Burnham should not find his hospitality abused.

Gallant Fraud

"I guess you've got a new grandson after all, Gramp," he whispered, and tossed his cigarette in a bright parabola to the dewy grass where it hissed and died. He went in, turned out the light and tiptoed up the stairs. He had begun dreaming of Rhoda long before he dropped into a peaceful slumber.

Amos Burnham wasn't asleep either. A twinge of arthritis in his shoulder still bothered him in spite of the stiff dose of aspirin he had taken earlier. He grunted, turned over and listened. Yes, Jimmie was coming up the stairs.

Jimmie! Humph! Funny business but mighty interesting. Two and two were beginning to add up to four. Why would a stranger be asking questions about the old paper mill, or pumping Joe Loomis the way Jimmie had? Amos knew all about that. He'd called Joe up on the phone during the afternoon. Joe hadn't seemed near so down in the mouth as usual either. He'd been mighty taken with Jim and the way Jim had talked about Hamilton's. Yeah, it did look significant, the boy's showing up just when Hamilton's was holding off. Maybe there was nothing in it, but

Gallant Fraud

then again, if this smooth young stranger from Wisconsin wasn't Jimmie Brown, and he certainly wasn't, what was he doing in East Joppa? He hadn't come to see Rhoda regardless of where she had run across him. Hard to tell just how those two parts of the puzzle fitted together, but time would show. Amos Burnham knew how to wait.

Let young Whoeverhewas get acquainted. There was no better way of his seeing what the mills could do to the valley than the one he was taking. If he'd come to spy out the land let him get an eyeful. Rhoda was a good one to show it to him, and it was a lot smarter for Amos to let her do it all unsuspectingly than to go rubbing in anything himself. It gave the girl the young company she needed, too. She's been lively as a cricket all day and prettier than ever.

Amos grunted again and rubbed his aching shoulder. Rhoda's head was screwed on the right way. She wasn't likely to lose it over the first good looking chap that came along. What if she did like this Jimmie fellow? Any man a big company gave such a responsibility couldn't be untrustworthy. Amos frowned. This evening, watching the two young men together, he'd been guilty of disloyalty to his own flesh and blood

Gallant Fraud

by wishing it had been this one instead of Urson— Well, if Rhoda should happen to— Nice to have a grandson you could take pride in.

Essie— Ahhhhhhh! Amos reached again for the aspirin bottle.

9



A WEEK looks fairly long from the front end when you have your doubts about what will happen in it, but when you get to the middle of what is proving to be a very pleasant time it begins to seem very short indeed. Since the evening of his arrival Peter had been careful not to bring up the subject of his visit's duration. He was gradually losing his apprehension over being caught out in his impersonation. Indeed, as day followed day and no untoward slip betrayed him, he began to feel much at home in the part of Jimmie Brown. It might be, he reflected whimsically, he had a real and hitherto unrecognized talent for the stage. That was a more attractive way of looking at it than the alternate possibility of his being a natural born schizophrenetic. Whatever the reason, he was no longer particularly nervous over the situation. He addressed Amos unhesitatingly as Gramp and re-

Gallant Fraud

sponded to the name of Jimmie practically by reflex.

Easily, imperceptibly, a bond of something very like an affection which had nothing to do with any real or pretended blood tie had formed and was strengthening. Peter's respect for and deference to the opinions of Amos was not assumed, and on his side Amos was congratulating himself daily that his judgment had not been wrong. Be the boy who he might, he *was* a young man after Amos Burnham's own heart. If sometimes he found himself regretting Peter was not his grandson, he grew more satisfied by the minute to have him on any terms. With quiet amusement, too, he watched the outwardly demure companionship of the pseudo-cousins flow smoothly on. Like Peter, he avoided any mention of the visit's termination.

Meantime Peter was very busy. His light often burned far into the night while the rest of the house slept. Painstakingly he went over every bit of information he gleaned during each day, setting it in concise form for his report to Uncle Henry. He had decided he would have to use the Bennetsville post office for his correspondence. East Joppa's Argus eye couldn't be trusted with mail even if it were directed to James Brown. A single forgetful moment on the part of

Gallant Fraud

Uncle Henry's secretary, the inadvertent use of the firm's official stationery and the grape vine would begin to twine. No, better Bennetsville than East Joppa, though he didn't feel too sure even of that. A master mind of the underworld, he grinned to himself, had nothing on him except for his benevolent intent.

By the time Sunday rolled around he had his report ready and sealed. He was determined to take the day with mind at ease for the furthering of his more personal interests. There would be another week at least before this very agreeable status quo could resolve itself. Why shouldn't he enjoy it?

Sunday, however, presented him with an unexpected ordeal. Oddly, he had not for a moment reckoned that his appearance at church would be as inevitable as that of a village bride. He might have known it would, if he had stopped to think that the Burnhams, as a family, would be punctilious about public worship, but he hadn't stopped to think. The Reverend John Burnham was little more than a name to him and the others had exhibited few of the earmarks of a pastor's family. But the minute he came down stairs to breakfast that morning he was struck by the Sabbath atmosphere pervading the house. At least that was what he discovered it was meant to be, though it was neither the

Gallant Fraud

placid nor even peaceful air one would naturally associate with the day of rest. Instead there was a subdued but purposeful bustle in Cousin Mira's every movement. Ordinarily unhurried, today she made it evident by word and act that the business of life was expected to move expeditiously and with no leisurely digression. No one was encouraged to linger over an extra cup of coffee. Peter's plate was whisked away as soon as he had laid his fork upon it, and even Amos, who had made a somewhat alarming appearance in a stiff collar and shiny shoes radiating a pungent aroma of blacking, omitted the usual hospitable urgings to another helping. Added to this, Rhoda was not present as she had been each morning hitherto.

"Rhody don't come over Sunday mornings," explained Amos, noting Peter's glance at the empty chair. "Meetin's at ten-thirty and she stays home to help Mirandy so's Mirandy can get there, too. You be ready to go along with us, Jim? There ain't no need of dressin' up as I know of only—" He eyed the young man's gray slacks and pullover dubiously.

Peter rose to the occasion. "It won't take me but a few minutes to change," he said. "I didn't think about church. Hope you won't think me a heathen, sir."

Amos waved the apology aside. "I guess we stick

Gallant Fraud

closer to the old ways here in the country," he said without an outward flicker of the amusement he was feeling. Here was another test for the youngster and a good one. It was one thing to fit into a family group or even to meet the people of East Joppa severally. It was going to be another altogether to stand up under a full battery in public. It remained to be seen how well he could take it.

But Peter came through with flying colors. Not for nothing had he ushered at half a dozen smart church weddings. He managed to walk down the aisle to the conspicuously placed Burnham pew with a complete lack of self-consciousness. He listened with proper deference to a pallid moral essay by the bespectacled youth from the theological school who was supplying the pulpit for the absent pastor, and sharing a hymn-book with Rhoda, joined in the singing with a very creditable baritone that created a mild stir among those near enough to distinguish it. After that he went through the informal reception in the vestibule without a quiver. Amos Burnham had much ado to keep his lips from twitching and his eyes from dancing as he received congratulations on the pleasing graces of his new grandson, especially when these came from

Gallant Fraud

elderly ladies and those less elderly who had daughters approaching an age ripe for marriage.

Peter himself was only too well aware of the comedy angle. He found the reception something of a tax on his self-control and social agility, and as soon as he could ease himself away without being obvious, he edged toward Rhoda who was getting her own share of greetings after her months of absence, and who, he could see out of the tail of his eye, was having quiet fun out of his predicament. With a skill for which he had been famous at fraternity functions, he cut her out of the now dispersing herd.

"Listen, honey," he pleaded sotto voce, "can't we get out of this pretty soon? Whew! I feel like the prize specimen in an incubator baby show! They've all but broken through and chucked me under the chin."

Rhoda giggled. "You're lucky to get off that easy. I overheard Mrs. Grant tell Gramp you were sweet enough to kiss."

"Which one is she?"

"The fat one in the purple silk," said Rhoda, "but listen, Donald Duck, if you are thinking of letting her ——"

"You know darn well whom I'm letting. Now be

Gallant Fraud

serious. Haven't I been a good boy long enough? Can't you and I take the rest of the day off, or does the minister's family have to stay on the job till sunset?"

"Not this minister's family," said Rhoda. "Thank heaven we don't have to entertain the supply either. He's some sort of an in-law of the Bassets and they're taking him in tow."

"That is lucky. He looks an awful twerp and it would pain me to share you with him. Where are we going?"

"Let me think. I expect Gramp and Cousin Mira will expect us for dinner, but after that— How would you like to take a picnic supper out to Mount Tabor? You haven't been there yet. We can climb or not as we feel like it, and eat whenever we please."

"Swell idea," said Peter. "Oh—er—will Urson and Essie be coming to dinner?"

"Oh, no, they're off somewhere. Essie—well, neither of them likes being around Sundays." She spoke with a flush of embarrassment.

"That makes everything just dandy," responded Peter. He had not been very favorably impressed by Urson in the few encounters he had had with him since the evening at Gramp's. Urson had been ingra-

Gallant Fraud

tiating in his manner, but Peter's original judgment of him had received unfortunate confirmation.

"You'll need to change, won't you?" he asked hastily to cover what had nearly been a slip. "That's a mighty becoming get-up but something tells me it wasn't made for picnics."

"And it's my best and I can't afford to spoil it. I have to collect a lunch, too, and Ersatz. Poor pooch! We've done so little for him lately and he'll just love this. Tell you what! Come home with me and entertain Miranda while she makes sandwiches. That will save time while I get into my little sports number. Besides, she needs her mind kept off the darker things of life."

Miranda was already at home and in the kitchen when they arrived. This was the first time Peter had been left alone with the gloomy housekeeper, but Rhoda had told him enough for him to be prepared for her melancholy outlook. He was not therefore alarmed when she received the suggestion of sandwiches as if she had been asked to prepare a memorial banquet to the shades of her ancestors, and he was able to discount the sniffs and sighs with which she went about the making of them.

What did surprise him was the sudden change that

Gallant Fraud

came over her as soon as Rhoda left them alone together. Miranda moved stealthily to the door and closed it with a conspiratorial air.

"You don't need to look as if I was gittin' ready to bite you, young man," she said, seeing amazement written on his countenance. "All is I've got to take my chance when I can git it. I ben aimin' to have a talk with you ever since you come to town."

"With me?" asked Peter dumbfounded.

"Yes, with you. I s'pose it does seem funny to you, but if you knew all I do it wouldn't. I reckon you think your grandpa's the one I should go to, but the fact is the poor man has stood the brunt o' Urson's misdoins till I'm fair ashamed to load anything more onto him."

"I judge it's something Rhoda doesn't know."

"She suspects, but she don't know all. Besides, she's done every livin' thing she can. I thought seein's you're one o' the fam'ly even if you be new to it, and seem to set consid'able store by her to boot, I could put a flea into your ear. Not that I think you can change things much, but I do declare if I don't speak my mind to somebody I'm going fair to bust."

"I'll help all I can, believe me," said Peter, "but it

Gallant Fraud

won't take her long to change and you'd better get on with it."

Miranda nodded comprehendingly. "Then here 'tis. I wish you'd fix it so's she will go out of this house and stay out. I know that sounds awful, but wait. There's been one scandal, and I don't want her around when the next one comes, and it's comin' soon, you mark my words."

"Wait a minute," interposed Peter. "I've got to get this straight. You know I haven't been in touch with the family and all this talk of scandal is new to me. I suppose it's about Essie, but if you don't mind tell me as briefly as you can. I'm not asking from curiosity. I want to help."

"So I figgered," said Miranda grimly, "and time indeed you knew. It starts with John Burnham's being the salt of the earth but blind as a bat, at least where Urson was concerned. What was worse he wouldn't take any advice about the boy even from Amos."

"When was this?"

"A couple years back. Urson he got kicked out o' state college. He told John a cock and bull yarn about how unjust he'd ben treated by the perfessors and John believed him. He was sot on the boy's having a

Gallant Fraud

good eddication so he started teachin' him to home so's he could pass the examinations to one o' the big universities. Urson is plenty smart, I'm here to tell you, which is part of the trouble. He pulled the wool over his pa's eyes from the first, spendin' only about half his time on the lessons and kitin' off all over the country to these here road houses the rest of it. If you ask me, the gov'nment had better poke its nose into a few o' them places instead of into the bizniss o' honest folks, but that ain't neither here nor there. Well, to come back to the story. Amos got wind of some o' Urson's doings, but John pooh-poohed 'em. Young folks was diff'rent these days, he says, and Urson was workin' hard and showin' himself a brainy boy and he deserved some amusement."

"How old was Urson then?"

"Now let's see. He was eighteen when he got out o' the Bennetsville Academy. Must of ben the better part of a year in state college. Wall, he was around twenty, I guess, when the trouble developed."

"Trouble?"

"Yeah, over this Essie trollop. Her folks kept one o' them dine and dance places up the north road, and a stinkin' hole it is, if all accounts are true. To make

Gallant Fraud

a long story short so's Rhody won't catch onto us, first thing we knew Simpson, that's the girl's father, showed up and claimed Urson had got the little hussy into trouble. I've always had my doubts and always shall have, but I can't prove nothin'. You know how 'tis in a place like this. There wa'n't nothin' honest folks like John and Amos could do except to make Urson do right by the girl. Naturally it made a lot o' talk, but in East Joppa a Burnham's a Burnham, and everybody loves John besides, so it wa'n't as long-lived a scandal as might be. The baby died. I may be a wicked old critter, but I must say I think it was a mercy. It's always given Essie a sort of whip to crack over their backs though."

"Is that all? I don't mean it isn't enough, but is that what you wanted to talk about?"

"No, worse luck! That was nigh two years ago. What's goin' on now is a kind o' sequel to it, I reckon. Amos got Urson a job over to the bank in Bennetsville. Urson, 'twas understood, was to pay his share of the expenses of this house. Wal, he ain't doin' it. What's more there's mighty queer doin's, 'specially since John left. Comin's and goin's at all hours. And where, I ask you, is she gittin' the money for all them

Gallant Fraud

fancy clothes she's got hangin' in her closet, and the shiny doodads she sports. Where is she after she takes the bus to Bennetsville every afternoon? Not with Urson. She comes sneakin' in long after he's back, though he's late enough, goodness knows. And yesterday I heard her tellin' him again she had to have a new car. Where's the money comin' from, I ask you with him not able to find fifteen dollars a week to pay me for his board?"

"I couldn't tell you," said Peter unhappily conscious of the way Urson had tapped the Hamilton resources recently. "My guess is probably something like yours. Lord, poor old Gramp!"

"Umm, that's the way I feel. He's had enough, though I'd rather see him take it than Rhody. It ain't fair to have her young life dirtied up with such doin's. Now if you can only ——"

"Hush!" warned Peter, "she's coming. Get on with the sandwiches. Believe me, I'll give it my best thought."

10



THE afternoon was one of those whose memory comes back years afterward, not in detail but as a mood, at a waft of faint perfume, the glint of sunlight on new leaves, or the soft, unfinished snatch of song from a drowsy bird. They could not have told what they talked of, threading their way up the shadowy trails on Tabor's slope, or afterward when they stretched on sun-warmed rocks in the clearing and luxuriated in their own healthy fatigue. Here they looked down on the home valley with East Joppa like the set of a marionet stage showing white through clouds of greenery. Then hand in hand they followed down the bed of the brook to the fringe of the maple grove where they lunched on ambrosia supplemented by wedges of Cousin Mira's famous fudge cake. All they could have reported about those hours was that there is nothing quite so marvelous in all the world as

Gallant Fraud

being together and in love. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven."

Replete with food and content, Peter lay sprawled on gray moss as springy as a mattress, his head in Rhoda's lap while the shadows grew longer and the sunset colors flamed and paled, her hand in his beneath his cheek.

"If I don't violate your constitutional rights by asking, adorable," he said dreamily, "what are you thinking about so solemnly?"

Her hair swung over his face like a soft curtain as she kissed him lightly between his eyes. "If you must know," she answered with exaggerated seriousness, "I was debating whether you are better looking upside down than right side up."

"Nut!" he said. "Here I was getting all set for a big romantic scene, and now I've got to wait until you decide whether I should enter walking on my feet or my hands."

She drew her forefinger along his nose. "You're a terrible glutton for flattery, aren't you, Lochinvar? Did I ever tell you what I was thinking about that afternoon a few centuries back when we first met?"

"If you did I can bear hearing it over. I just love to hear you run on."

Gallant Fraud

"You'll think I was awfully silly."

"Do you think that would come as a shock? Ouch, that's my ear, not the symbol of Democracy."

"I recognized it, Bottom. Honestly, does it seem possible that only seven days ago neither of us knew the other existed?"

"Allowing for a margin of error, it doesn't, but I beg to inform you that subconsciously I was aware of you as being somewhere in a sort of unfinished state, my dream girl, you know, not exactly jelled."

"It's an exquisite picture. Are you sure you aren't thinking of the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi? Wait till I get me a nice hungry squirrel. Now do you want me to tell you what I started to or not?"

"Charmed, I'm sure. Ripple along, sweetness and light."

Satz, who had stirred alertly at the word squirrel, yawned widely, grunted and subsided, nose on paws.

"He's bored," said Rhoda. "It annoyed him when he heard me say it the first time. Or maybe he's fed up on love. Possibly he's another old soul the way Aunt Libby thinks you are."

"I may be ersatz, too, but the rest of the parallel doesn't follow. But go on. I'm getting all worked up over the suspense."

Gallant Fraud

"I'm afraid you'll feel let down for a fact. It really does sound pretty driveling now I come to repeat it. You see I was admiring the mountain laurel. I remembered the myth about Daphne and I said how interesting it must have been in those days with all the handsome young gods trotting around in search of romance. As I recall, I made some quite invidious comparison between Ancient Greece and East Joppa. Then before my words were hardly cold there you were."

"Woman," thundered Peter, sitting up as if worked by a concealed spring, while Satz performed an obbligate of surprised yelps, "that will be enough. Have I not borne with being Jimmie and Philip, have I protested against being classed with Bottom the Weaver or other items from your classical gallery of waxworks, or winced and cried aloud over having you drag in that good old stooge Lochinvar, who after all did give a very good account of himself? No, indeed, I have not, but my gorge rises when you stick that lyretwanging, woman-chasing saphead Apollo into the parade. Oh come on, hon, it's getting dark under the bushes. Much as I regret it we'll have to be getting back to the car if we don't want to do some very unromantic stumbling in this rough old pasture." He

Gallant Fraud

drew her, as he spoke, to her feet and held her in the circle of his arm while they took a last look at the valley glimmering in the fading light.

"Just one minute more," pleaded Rhoda. "See, there's a tiny, tiny new moon. Peter, let's wish on it. It's our first new moon you know."

"The first of hundreds, darling. What are you going to wish?"

"No fair telling," she answered, "but can't you guess?"

The star shine was in her eyes.

"The night, as they say, is yet young," remarked Peter, his foot on the starter. "Where do we go from here?"

"It's nice up the North Road," replied Rhoda, leaning back contentedly. "I love riding in the dark. Let's go on until our consciences begin to prick."

"Mine won't. The alarm attachment is broken."

"I've still got one that works, perhaps because I've not been grown up very long. But seriously, I don't want to worry Miranda. You might not think it but she has quite a dreadful imagination. She thinks up the most lurid accidents."

"She doesn't imagine everything, does she?"

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda hesitated. "No, not everything," she answered after the pause. "Peter, she was telling you things, wasn't she? While I was upstairs, I mean. It's no use evading for you see I know her so well I could read the signs."

"She was simply confirming some of my own suspicions," he said gravely. "You don't mind my knowing, do you?"

"No-o, I suppose not. You'd have to eventually. I—oh, let's not talk about unpleasant things. This evening is ours. I can't bear to spoil it."

"Right you are. We'll shunt all nuisances into tomorrow, like our famous friend Scarlett. As for us, 'Backward, turn backward, oh, Time, in your flight, make me a child again just for tonight.'"

"I don't want to be a child again," said Rhoda, cuddling against his arm. "Why would it seem any fun to you to wait another ten years for this?"

They drove on through the balsam-scented darkness, stars sowing themselves more and more thickly across a peacock blue satin sky.

"I suppose we must go back," said Rhoda at last.

"The alarm going off?" quizzed Peter.

"Umhum, much as I hate it. It isn't just Miranda. All East Joppa looks askance at too late hours."

Gallant Fraud

"And we Burnhams are East Joppa," concluded Peter. "All right. We'll turn as soon as we find a good place. The road is narrow here and I've discovered the shoulders are soft. There are lights on ahead and probably a filling station."

But it was more than a filling station. Some sort of a roadhouse, judged Peter.

"A pretty gaudy looking joint for this part of the country," he said, swinging into the open graveled space.

Rhoda drew a sharp breath. "Oh, I didn't realize we had come so far. This—this is the place Essie's people run. Peter, why are you stopping?"

"Just to get a look at it. I don't suppose there's much going on of a Sunday night. You have your blue laws here in Vermont, haven't you?"

"Yes, we have them, but ——"

"But not always to keep?"

"It may be only gossip," she explained hastily. "I suppose we naturally think more about it because of what happened, still, the Simpsons haven't a very good reputation."

"Do you mind if I take a look around it for myself?" asked Peter, moved by more than curiosity. "I can make an excuse and ask for ginger ale or cokes.

Gallant Fraud

Or would you prefer an ice cream cone? They probably carry an innocuous stock in trade to cover what goes on *sub rosa*."

"Cones, if you must investigate. Get Satz a vanilla one. He loves them. But do be careful, Peter. If Urson and Essie should be here and should see you they might think you were spying. They're touchy as fury."

"Don't get excited. Trust your Uncle Peter. I won't be long."

The room he entered was no different from any other that outwardly catered to passing tourist traffic. At the moment it was empty, not even an attendant being behind the counter. But tobacco smoke drifted unmistakably on the air and there was a muffled sound of voices from behind a closed door at the back.

Peter went over to the counter and tapped briskly upon it with a coin. Almost at once the door opened and a man in a soiled white jacket came out, closing it behind him quickly, but not so quickly Peter's watchful eyes and ears did not register about what he had expected. He gave his order, however, as if he had noticed nothing or, if he had, felt no curiosity, and stood whistling carelessly while the attendant jammed

Gallant Fraud

cream into the cones. Once during the few minutes this took, the door was slightly opened and closed again abruptly, as if someone had changed his mind about coming out when he saw the bar was occupied. He knew he might have imagined it, being as he was prepared for suspicious conduct, but there seemed to him a furtive atmosphere about the place, if not something almost sinister. He saw nothing further with which to check this impression though, and having no excuse to linger, took his cones and went out to his car.

"Well?" said Rhoda.

"The G-Men are baffled," he replied. "All we get out of this is an ice cream cone apiece and not very luscious specimens at that. Here you are, Satz, old man, vanilla for you. How does he eat the thing, honey? Mr. Ford hasn't yet thought up dog dishes as standard equipment."

"I'll get out and feed it to him," said Rhoda, "but first let's pull over where we won't be so conspicuous. I still feel uncomfortable about being here."

"Right," said Peter, and backed around into the shadow of the building.

Satz bolted his own ice cream with gusto and yearned over Rhoda's.

Gallant Fraud

"Here, boy, take mine and let her alone," said Peter, tossing the dripping remains toward the dog and wiping his hands. "All aboard?" he asked briskly.

"Wait," cautioned Rhoda in a whisper. "Don't start the engine. Somebody's coming out." Silently she boosted the dog to the back seat and slipped in beside Peter.

Two figures were silhouetted for a minute in the lighted doorway before they lost themselves in the darkness of the parking area. But the glowing ends of their cigarettes showed they were coming toward a car not far from the Lincoln. Their voices, though low, were clearly audible in the windless night.

"Young Burnham's a fool," said the first shadow. "He ought to know by this time Simpson and Gilfillan'll have his pants."

"You know his kind. They don't ever believe what they don't want to. Wonder where he got his money. Must have struck a pay vein somewhere."

"Yeah, some long lost relative with a fat roll has turned up in the old home town. Urson's a smoothy. The going will probably be good till the guy gets wise to his pretty ways. Maybe he won't, or maybe the floozy will get her claws into him. Essie's a swell little gold digger."

Gallant Fraud

"She didn't do so well when she and Simpson figured to sink a shaft into old man Burnham."

"All the more reason why she'll be on the make somewhere else. I understand Len Jackson's the goat just now."

"Len can take care of himself. How's the handsome Urson taking it?"

The other gave a significant laugh. "Oh, Urson—" The ribaldry was mercifully lost in the roar of the motor.

For a moment neither occupant of the Lincoln moved or spoke, then Peter heard a soft sob and his heart went out to the girl beside him.

"Darling," he said, drawing her close, "don't take it too hard. I'm sorry you had to listen to such a crude statement, but after all—well, the facts are no different from what you knew before."

"It isn't that," choked Rhoda. "I'm used to the idea of Essie—and I—I haven't any illusions left about Urson, b-but, Peter, is it true he's been borrowing of you? Don't put me off, I have to know."

"Not enough to fret over," said Peter, "and no more than I'm perfectly willing to let him have. Forget it, lamb."

"I can't forget it. Oh, you don't know how I've

Gallant Fraud

dreaded his doing something of the sort. That's why I—I gave him what I had left over from college."

"How much?" asked Peter shortly.

"Almost a hundred dollars. It wasn't really mine. It was Gramp's, but he'd given it to me for extras I hadn't honestly needed, so I felt I ought to save it, and then Essie and Urson m-made me feel I wasn't doing my part, that I was sponging my summer expenses, I mean ——"

"And so you handed it over, you precious little goon. Didn't you know you might as well throw it down the drain?"

"But I told him—I gave it to him on condition he wasn't to ask you. He promised and I— Oh, and now— How much did you lend him, Peter?"

"Less than you did, I'm glad to say, considering whose pocket it's landed in. Did you know he was gambling?"

"Not absolutely. But I know Simpson has some sort of hold on him. Peter, what are we going to do? Gramp mustn't know. He's been more patient with Urson than anybody but me knows, but he's terribly just, too. If he thought Urson couldn't be trusted with money, he'd think he ought not to stay in the bank."

Gallant Fraud

"And he'd be right at that," said Peter grimly.

"But what would happen if Urson lost his job? And then there's Essie."

"Listen, dear," said Peter. "I know I'm asking a lot of you, but will you try to put this nasty mess out of your adorable head for a while? Let me do the worrying for us both. I have a notion I may be able to make some sort of an impression on your brother. If money talks so loud to him, I may be able to find a few dollars to whisper a few warning words in his ear."

"You won't ——?"

"Rest assured I won't hand it out to him without reason. Now let's go home. It may be several days before I can get things in hand so don't expect any over-night miracle. Just sit tight and don't fret."


He kissed her and pushed her gently back to her own side of the seat. "Here's where we make time back to the village," he said.

"Peter," said Rhoda so softly he almost missed it, "I think you're pretty wonderful."

"Regardless of my veiled past?" he quizzed to ease the tension.

"Regardless of anything," said Rhoda.

II

 RHODA did not appear at her grandfather's next morning as she had been doing since Peter arrived.

"I shouldn't, you know, not all the time," she had told Peter when they said good-night. "I've monopolized you. Oh, of course, I realize it was necessary at first, and now I naturally want to, but you do see, darling, I ought to leave you to Gramp more than I have."

"I suppose so," said Peter.

"You haven't had much chance to get well acquainted with him," she continued, "and I think he is beginning to feel it."

"He's seemed pretty well satisfied to leave us together as far as I've noticed," argued Peter. "He's always suggesting you take me here, there, or the other place. Still, I won't say you aren't right. You know him better than I do. I haven't found his mind exactly

Gallant Fraud

an open book. So if you refuse a date for tomorrow I'll stick around with him and exert my charm as a grandson."

It would, he decided in the long run, be a good idea for quite another reason. Although he felt he knew almost all there was to know about the reasons for the opposition to the proposed mill project, he hadn't heard Amos himself discuss them except indirectly. He had touched upon them often enough but only scrappily as something Jimmie Brown could not possibly be much interested in. Peter had been pleased with that up to a point, for it indicated he was not under suspicion. Still, he felt that he could strengthen his reports to Uncle Henry if he had the full Burnham version of the case.

He found the old man in the barn this morning, pouring a measure of oats into Maggie's manger.

"Hi, Gramp," he said with an ease bred of a week of familiarity. "How about a job for a chore boy today? I'm at loose ends. My girl has given me the air."

"Hello, Jimmie," returned Amos, tossing the empty measure into the bin and closing the lid. "What kind o' farm jobs did they teach you how to do at that fancy university of yours?"

"You have me there," laughed Peter. "You'd prob-

Gallant Fraud

ably consider Vergil's Eclogues nothing but trimmings. I do like animals, though." He rubbed the shiny cheek of the old mare who raised her head and nuzzled his hand, blowing into it with her nostrils. He patted her neck and she went back to her oats. "All learning doesn't come from schools, does it?" he asked casually.

"Umm, no, but I didn't know's you'd of found it out so quick," said Amos. "You do seem to have a way with critters. That mutt of Rhody's behaves real human with you, and I hear tell you're pretty good with cats, too. Now here's Maggie joinin' the constituency."

Peter grinned. "How'd you know about the cat?" he asked.

"I was over to see Libby yesterday, but I didn't get much of anywheres. All she could talk about was you."

"Oh," said Peter flushing uncomfortably, "I—er—that is ——"

Amos chuckled. "You don't need to hem and haw, son. Libby's pretty close mouthed except where she feels 'tis safe and most folks give her a wide berth anyhow. It ain't likely to get around what she thinks about you." He sobered as he added, "I'm kind o' proud of

Gallant Fraud

the way you've acted towards her, Jimmie. 'Tain't every young feller would of been so considerate of the poor old coot's feelings."

"Don't give me too much credit, sir," protested Peter. "I'm honestly interested in her. She's rather fine in her peculiar way and her mania is all the more tragic because she is so sane every other way. I don't think of her queer clothes any more, and at any rate they are no worse than a lot of the idiosyncrasies affected by other people who consider themselves perfectly balanced."

"Well, I confess that's about the way I've always looked at it," said Amos, "and not many of us who know her well and are used to her think of her as anything worse than eccentric. It's a question if more than a very few suspect her of this flare. It's a streak that don't come out unless it's touched off, and the Spanish War ain't much talked of these days. If it hadn't been for the cat's taking to you and your happening to look a mite reminiscent of Phil Ladd, you might never have heard anything about it yourself."

"Since it's such a comfort to her I'm glad it happened as it did," said Peter, "though it was a weird

Gallant Fraud

experience while it was going on. But were you trying to do business with her? Is she competent to manage her own affairs?"

"It's kind of hard to tell. She ain't what you'd call trustful, which while it kind o' works against the interests I'm concerned with is a safeguard in another way. You've heard me speak off and on of this Hamilton Mill matter. I don't know how much you may have picked up around the village, or how much what you've been told means to you."

"I've talked with Joe Loomis," admitted Peter. "He told me about the dam."

"Yeah," nodded Amos. "Told you, too, what would happen to his own place if it went in down-stream?"

"He did, and I sympathize with him. He's a darned fine chap, and I have a hunch I'd feel exactly as he does if I were in his shoes. He was absolutely frank though. He seems to think he's the only one of those whose land would be affected who cares."

"He told you about the flood control?"

"Yes, and it's logical. Gramp, have you ever put this up to the Hamiltons direct?"

"No."

"I think you'd have done well to. They have a repu-

Gallant Fraud

tation out our way of being on the square. Isn't it possible this Rogers has misrepresented the situation to them?"

"He could of, and knowin' him, I wouldn't put it past him. But Rogers can't do any more'n I can unless he can get them proxies o' Libby's. As I told you before, she ain't trusting. She's got the idea sot in her mind from somethin' her pa said to her, that signin' her name to anything is equivalent to sendin' herself to the poor house. I've done my darndest to make her see it ain't, but the most I've accomplished is to make sure she won't sign any quicker for the next feller."

"That's funny."

"Not so much as you'd think. She's a woman, and in her day women weren't encouraged to understand things like stocks and bonds. Why even your Cousin Mira thinks they're some sort of reptile that needs to be handled with tongs if it ain't to sting you. Then again, if it had been just me, that she sort of likes, she might of given in after a spell, but when two parties get after her for the same thing, she goes into her shell like an old turtle and she'll likely stay there, as they say, till it thunders."

"Her shares are absolutely necessary to the con-

Gallant Fraud

trolling interest?" asked Peter warily, recalling in time that all this was supposed to be news to him.

"They sure are, and as long as she holds onto them Rogers is helpless. That's next best to gettin' 'em myself. The only trouble is he's mighty onscrup'lous, and he might trick her somehow."

"He mustn't," said Peter, so much engrossed in his own thoughts he failed to see the glint that came into the deep-set old eyes watching him from beneath their heavy brows.

"Well," said Amos, "I dunno's you can do much. That's the way it stands to date. Seems if the Hamiltons had sort of lost interest lately. Nobody 'pears to know why."

"May I ask you something else, Gramp?" asked Peter.

"Sure, son."

"I know you are opposed to having the site of the dam changed. Don't you want the mills here at all?"

Amos made no reply for a few seconds, then he spoke slowly. "That's a hard question. It's bound to mean change to the valley if they come. We've always been an independent folk. There's none of us rich and some of us are pretty poor. But those who have enough

Gallant Fraud

have managed to see the others shouldn't want, and we've never asked help of the government."

"The mills would furnish employment."

"And there'd be times they'd furnish unemployment, too, and a worse and bigger kind of it. If 'twas just the local population that would be given work, or those in the surrounding districts, we'd manage as usual to take care of 'em when work was slack and they were laid off. But the bigger the mill the more industrial floaters will settle on us. There'll be a raft o' Canadian French. Not that I have anything against 'em as such, but they ain't our responsibility, and they'll land on our relief rolls when the mills shut down and leave 'em stranded. We've got our own burdens without takin' on Canada's.

"Then again there's the question of labor troubles. We're a peaceful farming people. We ain't used to strikes and violence. I'm not saying the Hamiltons wouldn't avoid this if they could, but these are parlous times in the industrial world. You see, Jim, there's quite a lot to be thought of from our point of view."

"Yet you would sell to Hamilton if you could be sure the old dam site would be restored?"

"Yes. Taking everything together, I guess I would.

Gallant Fraud

No man has a right to obstruct properly conducted private enterprise in a time like this. There's been too much of that a'ready. All's I stick out for is that the valley shall be protected as fur as is consistent with industrial progress, and that those who have lived here in peace and decency shan't be pushed out of what they've worked for all their days to make way for the kind that think the world owes 'em a living any time they want to quit."

"I think I understand you perfectly," said Peter. "What's more I believe you are right."

"I kind o' thought you might, boy, once you got to knowin' the valley from the inside," replied Amos, laying his hand affectionately on the young man's shoulder. "Now to come back to Libby. I don't know as anything is like to happen, but I saw Rogers around the village this morning. If you should happen by her place you might find out if he's been there again."

"I certainly will," said Peter. "I don't like the sound of that fellow."

"You'll like the looks of him still less," chuckled Amos. "Well, got to be gittin' over to the store, Jim. Any time you hanker to see them fertilizer samples I'll be pleased to show 'em to you."

Gallant Fraud

Feeling himself gently dismissed, Peter went over to the garage and backed out the Lincoln. There was no point in making another report to Uncle Henry until he heard from those already sent in. Hardly time for him to get any mail from the west, but he might as well run over to Bennetsville on a chance. He could look in on Aunt Libby on the way and make sure Rogers wasn't annoying her. If Rhoda hadn't said so emphatically he was not to call her up— But on the whole, with so much else on his mind, it might be a good thing to wait till evening to see her.

Considering his reason for passing Aunt Libby's, he should have felt no great surprise at seeing another car parked at the foot of her lane. And yet the sight of it caused him apprehension. If Rogers was here, he knew instinctively he must lose no time getting to him.

Rhoda had been daydreaming. Essie, as usual, was not up, and Urson, looking decidedly haggard, and behaving, as Miranda put it, like a bear with a sore head, had gone off to work after a hurried snatch at his breakfast. Miranda was clattering about in the kitchen obviously in no mood for conversation, so taking a dust cloth, Rhoda went into her father's study. Days

Gallant Fraud

ago she had promised to clean the desk, but she had been so busy with Peter she had completely forgotten until now that the job still waited for her.

Try as she might, though, she could not keep her mind on the task, and before she knew it, she was sitting in her father's big shabby leather chair, her elbows propped on the ink-stained blotter, and her eyes fixed unseeingly, for all the world like a crystal gazer's, on the old mille fleur paperweight. What she saw was, however, more concerned with the past than with the future. She was living over moment by moment, that heavenly Sunday afternoon on Tabor's slopes.

The telephone bell roused her from her reverie. The extension stood on the desk and she knew Miranda would expect her to take the message.

"Hello," she said. "Oh, it's you, Cousin Mira. Yes, Rhoda."

"Well, I'm sure glad to get hold of you," said Mira heartily. "Is Jimmie there with you?"

"Why no. Isn't he with Gramp?"

"They was together quite a spell out in the barn," said Mira, "but your grandpa went to the store and Jimmie got into his car. I thought likely he had gone over to get you, seein' he don't seem happy long with you out of his sight."

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda laughed happily. "Did you want him for something?"

"I want somebody and he'd do. Here I be with a batch of cookies in the oven and a cake part mixed, and not a grain of baking powder in the house."

"Oh, if that's all, I'll rush some right over to you. What kind do you want?"

"They'll know at the store. You just tell 'em it's for me. G'bye."

In another minute Rhoda was on her way to release the cake from Limbo.

"I can't conceive whatever come over me," apologized Mira, accepting the can with relief. "I usually keep an extry on hand and you could of knocked me down with a feather when I went to put my hand on it and it wasn't there."

"I'm glad I could get it for you," said Rhoda. "Doesn't it seem funny not to have Jimmie around?"

Mira grunted. "Wal, mebbe to you, but I ain't seen so much of him myself as to know any great difference. I must say though, what I have seen I've liked. Him and your grandpa seem to set the world by one another. It sure is hard to reconcile the way he appears to be now with the way he's treated Amos all these other years."

Gallant Fraud

"Yes, doesn't it?" smiled Rhoda. "Don't you want me to help you, Cousin Mira? I haven't anything special to call me home."

"I'd admire to have you," assented Mira. "I kind of got started on this bakin' and I've done more'n I set out to. That means I ain't had a minute to do the chamber work. If you'd make Jimmie's bed and tidy up his room it would help a pile. I give him credit that for a man he's neat as a pin, but you know how they all be, even the best of 'em."

"Yes," said Rhoda. "I'll do the other rooms, too."

She ran up the stairs humming softly. Not even the shadow of Urson could dim the thought of Peter for long.

She deliberately left his room for the last, making short work of Gramp's where familiarity made routine easy. Cousin Mira had evidently not included her own, in the untoward bit of neglect, for a single peep showed it to be spic and span as always. Only the big front chamber where guests of the Burnham home always lodged in spacious if old-fashioned comfort remained.

Rhoda paused on the threshold, remembering instinctively the childhood awe she had felt in the dim, sacred order of the "spare chamber." Today it was

Gallant Fraud

unnaturally full of sunlight, for Peter obviously was as allergic to window shades and curtains as the average male, and had run the former to the top of the sashes. Rhoda smiled indulgently over this foible. She had grown up in an all man family and had spent much of her time since coming to an age of helping with housework pulling down shades in the wake of ruthless snappers-up. Now she reduced Peter's to uniformity before looking to see what else needed doing.

She stood still in the middle of the floor and her dreams washed over her again. Something of Peter's own presence lingered in the place, for like all rooms which have not lost face from prostitution to boarders, this one had already taken on the personality of its occupant, had even acquired a sort of mayfly soul, intangible, but making its ghostly presence felt to all but the most insensitive observer. Rhoda was anything but insensitive, especially to whatever concerned Peter, and now her breath caught as this floating wraith touched her and as she saw the small intimate evidences of him here and there. As Mira had said, he was not untidy, but there was, for all that, a pleasing touch of disorder about the tie he had worn yesterday draped a little askew by the mirror, and the brushes dropped

Gallant Fraud

on their sides upon the dresser, in the half-used package of cigarettes by the unemptied ashtray on the bedside table next to the book he had evidently dipped into before turning out the light.

What a lot of things there were she and Peter still didn't know about each other, she mused. All those years of training and developing natural tastes, the comparing of which couldn't possibly have been crowded into their brief days of acquaintance. For instance, what did she know of what he liked best in the realm of art and letters? What book would he choose to take with him on a journey? She picked it up, looking curiously at the title. What fun! She had wanted to read that particular biography, but with lessons and outside readings there hadn't been time for it. Now she'd ask Peter to take it along the next time they went on a picnic and they could share it.

Purely by accident she fumbled laying the volume down and the cover fell back, revealing an inscription on the flyleaf. With no thought of prying, her eyes took in the words written in a gay scrawl beside a snapshot stuck to the page.

"To Peter darling. Happy birthday from Kay, the better three-quarters." The picture showed a plump

Gallant Fraud

boy baby, held by a girl with a vivid face and a proudly tender smile. Beneath it ran in the same script, "and from Peter Belding, aged eleven months and three days."

She must have stood staring at it numbly for a long time, before sensation began to creep back. Then she was aware of pain only as something hovering impersonally, as one recognizes it through the last thin veils of a passing opiate. Yet her sight seemed unbearably sharpened, taking in every line of the pictured face of that other girl, the unblemished happiness of her smile. The well-loved, protected look of the little group stamped itself indelibly on her mind. She would have closed her lids against it if she could, but a strange paralysis kept them from moving. The face of the baby seemed almost alive. There was no doubt left. The shape of the child's head, the breadth between the merry eyes, that odd and individual slight crookedness of the tiny mouth—they were all Peter.

"No, Peter, oh, no, no!" she whispered, knowing all the while her denial could not alter facts. Mechanically, with fingers that seemed to have no connection with her own volition, she closed the book and replaced it meticulously in the exact spot from which

Gallant Fraud

she had taken it. In the same automatic way she emptied the ashtray, straightened the lamp shade and proceeded to the making of the bed, smoothing every wrinkle and squaring the corners of the counterpane as if her life and sanity depended on mathematical accuracy. And all the while scraps of remembered talk came drifting back, blown by the cold wind of disillusion. At first they were only scraps, but as they accumulated they began to form themselves into an ugly, mocking pattern, not so much of deception, for he had never pretended there wasn't something he was concealing, as of evasion of what he must have known would make everything between them different.

"How could you, oh, how could you, Peter," she said, pressing clenched knuckles against her lips until both were bruised. Running from the room she took refuge in her grandfather's chamber.

"I've got to face it," she thought, sinking into the old slipper chair that had once been Martha Burnham's. "But how am I ever going to do it?" At first she saw no answer. No consecutive thought was possible in the chaos surging through her. Little by little, however, she grew steadier.

"The real trouble began with me," she told herself.

Gallant Fraud

"I was blinded by love. If I hadn't been I would have seen he has never once said a thing about our being married. He even said he had to ask me to wait until he was free. What a fool I was not to realize what he might mean by it. But oh, Peter, Peter, you asked me, too, to trust you! Perhaps you ask all women to trust you. You must have made Kay do it, or she'd never look the way she does."

Bleakly she faced a probable alternative. Peter would have to choose between Kay and her. Between her and the combined force of Kay and little Peter. And she was the interloper. Perhaps he had been on his way home to them when she had waylaid him on the road. In that case he would still have been Kay's but for the foolish impulse of a girl he had never seen before—Kay's and little Peter's. There was no use denying the complication little Peter made in an otherwise bad enough situation. What right had Rhoda Burnham to take that look of protected love from a baby's face? For that matter, what right had she to take it from that of a girl scarcely older than herself and prettier and far better poised and more attractive than she? This was being painfully honest. Rhoda had the instincts of her own generation and a share of its hardness. She

Gallant Fraud

understood modern youth's theory of the spoils system and she might have liked to practice it. But something inherent in her, a solid race concept of honor, backed by the only half relinquished code of an old-fashioned up-bringing told her that she had already lost her fight for Peter's love before she had begun it. Though she bled inwardly all the rest of her days, she could not take him from his wife and child.

Hard as it was, this decision seemed to lift some of the weight of pain from her heart. And with the lifting came clearer thinking. Should she let Peter know of her fortuitous discovery or should she not? Though the strain on herself would be greater, she decided almost at once it would be better not. Fortunately she and Peter had kept the secret of their love to themselves, so this whole matter lay strictly between them. It would not do to alter without explanation the conditions under which he remained in the household. To Gramp he must still be Jimmie, and Gramp must not suspect any change in the pleasant comradeship of the two cousins. That went, too, for the rest of the village as well as of the family. Yet if she told Peter what she knew there would be an inevitable constraint and the difficulty of carrying on would be doubled.

Then there was Urson. Rhoda was convinced he

Gallant Fraud

was in deeper trouble than they had at first suspected. There was something going on between him and Essie, too. Angry recriminations seeped out from behind their closed door. Miranda knew something and was worrying. Peter had said he would help keep it from Gramp. Peter, by some inexplicable chemistry, had become an element necessary to the family happiness and well-being.

Had he cheated? Perhaps, but it had come more from his letting her make a cheat of him. He couldn't have gone on making love to her if she had not given him a perfect opportunity. Fundamentally the blame was hers and she alone must bear the inevitable punishment.

And meantime how was she to go on? As if nothing had happened? Could she? Was it going to be possible to endure the bitter sweetness of loving and letting him love her, all the while knowing it would have to end so soon? It would be hard, but in the final analysis easier than a sharper break. She would have his kisses to remember—"sweet as those by hopeless fancy feigned on lips that are for others." Would it be counted against her as wrong to keep this much for herself when Kay would have Peter himself through all the time to come?

Gallant Fraud

"You'll have to forgive me, Kay," she said, "for I'm going to do it."

Again decision brought relief, this time an enveloping sense of peace. And with renunciation a resurgence of love for Peter purified by loyalty to what until an hour ago had seemed so fine and true in him, to what she must manage to keep true and fine in him.

"Peter, Peter, you must let me trust that much in you," she whispered. And all at once it seemed quite easy.

"Rhody," called Cousin Mira's voice from the foot of the stairs, "you still up there? Come down quick. Jimmie's drivin' into the yard and of all things, if he ain't got Libby Balch along with him."

12



PETER could not have explained the reason for his overwhelming urgency to stand by Aunt Libby. She had made a notable stand against Rogers so far and the probability was she could go on holding her own. Amos had said the man was unscrupulous, but he had not been sufficiently afraid of what he might do to take a hand against him personally. Of course he might have assumed that Peter would act for him. Oddly enough it had not occurred to Peter that he himself had switched over from being a potential opponent of Amos Burnham to the tacit position of ally. The paradox of being sent in as a shock troop to prevent Hamilton Mills from getting what they wanted had not yet struck him as amusing. Indeed, the fate of the proxies was not uppermost in his mind. He wanted to get to Aunt Libby to protect her from some danger he subconsciously felt was threatening.

Gallant Fraud

Forgetting for once to observe the uncanny movements of the cats among the bushes, he hurried up the lane to the house. There was no sign of human occupancy, but the door was slightly ajar and three half-grown maltese kittens were rolling and tumbling in play beside the doorstep on which a still moist, empty milk dish gave evidence the mistress had recently been present.

Peter stood on no ceremony. He pushed open the door and entered the dusky hall. There he stopped to listen. A man's voice raised argumentatively came from the living room, followed by the old woman's contralto tones roughened by protest. Whether the intruder was Rogers or not, he had evidently not yet got what he wanted. Peter crept silently forward. As long as she could manage the fellow for herself he would not intrude, but if interference were indicated he was there to furnish it. He had slight use for eavesdropping as a business tactic, but now if ever it seemed justified. He was in a way to find out what had been going on under the surface of what at long distance had appeared a straightforward enough transaction between his own company and the defunct Joppa mill stockholders.

Gallant Fraud

From where he stood in the dark hall he could see, without being seen, into the room. Aunt Libby, for once without her battered hat and the rusty Prince Albert coat, sat very erect in the heavy chair that had been her father's. Her gaunt figure in the severe, old-fashioned dark dress, her fine hands clutched hard on the arms of the chair and her white head held high against the neo-gothic carving of the chairback made a picture he would be long in forgetting. For a moment he ceased to remember why he was there, so surprised was he by the realization that in spite of the ravages of age and neglect, she had that kind of ruined beauty which great artists have always loved. This and the striking dignity of her bearing were emphasized by the contrast her caller presented.

Rogers, for Rogers Peter was certain now it was, stood by the table, his heavy shoulders thrust forward, one fist beating the measure of his words.

"I tell you," he was bellowing, "I've pussypawed as long as I'm going to. It ain't for you to say you will or you won't sign. You're going to or you're bound to be good and sorry."

"And I have told you," replied a tired old voice, "that I have no intention of signing anything. Have the

Gallant Fraud

kindness to lower your voice, Mr. Rogers. You are frightening my cat."

"Damn your cat," growled Rogers, glaring balefully at Boola who had jumped to Miss Balch's lap, adding a glitter of color to the austere picture. "I'm fed up with your nonsense. I don't know why I've fooled around this long, acting as if you were a sensible human. It ain't as if I couldn't have had you declared non-compos any time. Why, everybody knows you ought to have been stuck in the loony bin years ago. Now either you sign on the dotted line or I'll see you're put where you belong. You understand that, or are you too nutty to get my meaning? Sign or be shut up! That's my last word."

Aunt Libby clutched Boola against her flat breast and rose. Her face was like a white flame. "You dare to threaten me because I won't give you what is my own?" she said, and something warned Peter his time had come to act before her nerves snapped and she became what Rogers intended to goad her into being.

"Yeah," snarled the man, "that's about the size of it. Here, put down that confounded cat or I'll . . ."

He took a step toward her as if to snatch Boola. The cat jumped, and his extended hand grasped the old woman's arm instead. He pushed her so roughly she

Gallant Fraud

stumbled and fell against her chair. "That'll learn you," he said.

"And that," said Peter, leaping across the room and bringing his fist with a resounding crack against the prognathous jaw of the bully, "will give you a lesson of your own."

"Philip!" cried Aunt Libby. "Oh, Philip, my dear! I am so glad you have come!"

Peter cast a brief glance of appraisal at his prone victim and saw that he was more surprised than hurt, for he was already sitting up and rubbing his bruised jaw and a bump on the back of his head where it had cracked against the floor.

"Stay right where you are, boy," cautioned the young man. "There's plenty more where that came from." And to Aunt Libby, "Did he hurt you? Let me take a look at your arm."

"No, no, Philip. I'll be all right now you're here," she fluttered. "Did you hear what he said? You won't let him take me away?"

"I certainly won't," promised Peter. "Now you sit down and pull yourself together. There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll handle this cur for you and I promise it won't have to be done a second time."

"Philip, he's dangerous."

Gallant Fraud

"Not to me, Aunt Libby. Now Rogers, climb up onto those flat feet of yours. Not being in the class with thugs who kick helpless animals and women, I prefer to give you anything you may ask for standing."

The man struggled up to his feet clumsily and stood swaying groggily. "You," he snarled, "what business have you got butting in? Oh, you're old Burnham's grandson. I suppose he sent you. Thought he'd get ahead of me, did he? But say, I thought your name was Jim Brown. What's she call you Philip for?"

"We're discussing your conduct, not my name," said Peter.

"The hell we are. Don't think I can't see through a barn door when it's wide open. That feller of hers that went off to the war and never came back was named Philip. She's taking you for him, which just goes to prove what I said. She's crazy as a bed bug. What she needs——"

Peter did not wait. He knocked Rogers down again and stood over him.

"I warned you you'd get whatever you asked for," he said savagely. "If it weren't that I don't want to put myself in your class and kick a man when he's down, you'd be in for a sizable number of contusions. When

Gallant Fraud

you're ready to leave the lady out of this, we'll talk. Until then make up your mind to stay put. It will be less painful than making a series of landings."

Rogers hunched himself into a sitting position, otherwise he obeyed to the letter.

"I'll get even with you," he growled. "I'll have you up for assault and battery. If Burnham thinks he can get away with anything like this he's got another guess coming."

"And so have you," said Peter coolly. "What do you think you can do with those proxies you intended to scare Miss Balch into signing? Close a deal with Hamilton's? You stand just as good a chance of being the next president. I happen to know a bit about Henry Hamilton and I can assure you he is completely allergic to snakes, especially those with yellow stripes."

"Sez you! And how does an upstart squirt like you happen to be so smart and knowing? Don't tell me this ain't some of Burnham's cagey stuff. Pious old ——!"

"You can leave my grandfather out of this, too, Rogers. You have evidently forgotten I came from Wisconsin. It's a big state, but Hamilton's is a big firm. People get to hear of them. And now that the introductions are over, let's get down to business. You're

Gallant Fraud

going to leave this house the minute I say start, and you will stay out. By that I mean you needn't try any monkey business such as sending in your agents or otherwise annoying Miss Balch."

"And I suppose you believe you can order me around, young Hop-o-my-thumb!"

"I jolly well know I can," said Peter. "I know it so well I don't even have to cite penalties. I'm a stranger in Vermont, but unless it is different from every other state in the union, Maine included, it has laws which make acquiring other people's property under threat or duress a crime! I'm a witness to your having committed that crime this morning. Miss Balch has only to enter a complaint and I will appear in court to testify against you. And now we are ready to say good-bye. In case you don't get the meaning of that idiom—scram!"

Rogers had wilted very materially, but he still made a show of bravado, muttering as he clambered to his feet. He edged sullenly toward the door, keeping a wary eye on his victorious adversary lest he suffer attack from the rear.

"Don't leave any souvenirs," said Peter handing him his hat, "you aren't expected back. Don't forget I'll be watching you out of sight. Remember also, my

Gallant Fraud

friend, that your goose is cooked. You may as well wire Wisconsin you're through."

A few minutes later, having kept his word by following at a distance to make sure Rogers had removed himself from the vicinity, Peter returned to Aunt Libby. Much to his delight he found her entirely calm and self-possessed. Not until then did he realize how much he had himself feared for her sanity, which, lightly balanced as it was, could so easily have been pushed into the abyss by the emotional experience she had passed through. Rogers was no doubt thoroughly frightened at the moment, but when he had time to gather his forces again, he might see a chance to take reprisals by working on public opinion with distorted stories of the old woman's mental condition. Now Peter saw any such line of action would be vain. Her present manner was the best possible refutation to any such claim. The next and most necessary move was to get others besides himself to see her while she was in this normal, perfectly poised state.

She came to meet him and he took both her hands, scanning her face but without letting her see there was any hint of anxiety in his mind, and slipping his arm around her thin shoulders.

"You were fine," he said. "I wish I had a picture of

Gallant Fraud

you as you looked sitting there defying that worm. But you must be tired. Don't you want me to take you over to Gramp's for a little while? Cousin Mira's been talking about inviting you over to spend the day and I know she'll be delighted to see you." A good spot of gossip by any East Joppa neighbors who could be rounded up to see Aunt Libby as she now was, he reckoned, would be all the counter-propaganda needed. Moreover, he didn't want to leave her here alone and he had too much business of his own afoot to stay with her.

"I'm not tired," she said. "I haven't felt so much like myself for a long while. It's as if I'd waked up out of a bad dream. Maybe it's as that man said, and I have been getting queer living all alone so with only the cats. A body that hasn't anyone to talk to day in and day out dwells more on them that are gone. Sometimes it seems as if they were here again, but they don't come back. Only you, Philip." She paused and looked hard at him. "But you aren't Philip. Philip would be an old man. He's always stayed young in my thoughts and so it seemed to me— You're so like him. What did you say your name is?"

Gallant Fraud

"Rhoda told you it is Jimmie Brown, don't you remember," hedged Peter. "I came from the west."

"Yes, yes, I recall. You're Amos Burnham's grandson, but you might have been Philip's and mine."

"I'm glad to be like him," said Peter gently, "and I want you to believe I'd do anything he would want me to do for you. I'm sure he wouldn't wish me to leave you alone now. That's why I'm urging you to come with me."

"I'll go," said Aunt Libby, "but first I want you should have something." She went briskly across the room and opened a door that had been closed whenever Peter had seen it before. As she passed through he caught a glimpse of the monumental black walnut chamber set which had once been old Captain Balch's, and the high, carved headboard of the bed on which he had died. Presently she returned.

"There," she said thrusting a long envelope into Peter's hand, "you take it. I was keeping it for Philip, but he'd want me to give it to you. Your grandpa's a fine man. It wasn't that I didn't trust him. I was saving it for you. You can do what you like with it."

Peter did not need to look at the contents of the en-

Gallant Fraud

velope and he felt hesitancy in accepting it. She was still confusing him with Philip Ladd though the hallucination had lost much of its grip on her, and he disliked the idea of taking advantage of what was still a vagary.

"But Aunt Libby," he said, "don't you know this stock is worth quite a lot of money? I can't take it as a gift. Neither would Gramp. Hamilton Mills will pay you enough for it to make you a nice little nest egg."

Aunt Libby looked bewildered. "But it hasn't paid dividends for ever so long. I haven't been getting dividends on most of what Pa left lately. First along there was plenty of money, but now there's only a few dollars the first of the month. I haven't known where to turn scarcely. After the taxes were paid there's been barely enough to keep soul and body together and feed the cats. I never did have much head for business and I've been so scared I'd have to go to the poor house."


"If you'll let me look over your securities I have a hunch we can do something to alter all that," said Peter. "You won't need to be a business woman because from now on you're going to have a man to look

Gallant Fraud

out for you. Now get your bonnet. We have to be going."

Aunt Libby laughed delightedly. "You won't be ashamed to be seen riding out with an old scarecrow like me?"

"I'd be proud of riding anywhere with Miss Libby Balch," said Peter. "You and I are going to be seen together often from now on."



DOWN stairs Rhoda found Cousin Mira bustling around Aunt Libby uttering little clucks and chirps of pleasure.

"Well, I do declare," she chattered, "if this ain't the nicest surprise. Only the other day I was sayin' to Amos what a pleasure 'twould be if Libby Balch would only drop in for a good visit. It never occurred to me that Jimmie would notice what I said and go to work to fix it. It's just like the boy, if you ask me. Now let me have that bonnet of yours and you set yourself down in that rocking chair and rest yourself. I'll just go take a look at my custard pie for it's about ready to come out of the oven and you know what custards is if they're over-done. After that we'll settle down for a real good gossip."

"You mustn't do anything extra for me, Mira," warned Aunt Libby. "It's real unexpected my drop-

Gallant Fraud

ping down on you like this, but Phil—I mean Jimmie said you wouldn't be put out. You always were a capable creature."

At the quick amendment of the name Peter patted Aunt Libby's shoulder and she smiled up at him as ingenuously as a child pleased at being commended for saying the right thing.

Naturally Cousin Mira lost the point, but Rhoda did not.

"My sakes," the housekeeper bubbled on, "I should say I wasn't put out. You won't make a mite more work. I'll just set on another plate. As for Amos, he'll be tickled as a cat with two tails. He don't know Libby's here, does he, Jimmie?"

"No," said Peter, "but if you'll excuse me, I'll hustle over to the store right now and tell him. I've got other things to talk over with him besides."

Those other things, judged Rhoda who had been more or less a silent member of the party during the welcoming process, must be of considerable importance, for Peter looked to be bursting with excitement. How they could be connected with Aunt Libby and her sudden transplanting she could not conjecture, but that they were weighty enough to drive everything

Gallant Fraud

else, even herself, out of his mind was evident. This was a lucky break for Rhoda. She knew that he would not be likely to notice any stiffness in her manner that must come from the inevitable self-consciousness her discovery had imposed upon her. Once past her first meeting with him, however, she felt she might be able to carry on with some semblance of her old ease.

Then again her curiosity in the peculiar and mysterious turn of affairs substituted a wholesome objective interest that went far to crowd out her own troubles. Best of all, the appearance of Aunt Libby gave her something so impersonal to talk about that she need fear no awkward moments when they were left alone together. The consciousness of all these advantages had a very steadying effect on her, so that when Peter turned to her and said, "Coming with me, aren't you?" she responded not only without reluctance but with considerable alacrity.

"I'm simply dithering to know what's happened," she began the minute she had him to herself. "Don't think I didn't notice she called you Jimmie, either. Go on and tell before I explode from curiosity."

"Gosh," said Peter, "I feel as if I had already blown up. You remember hearing Gramp and me talk about that mill business?"

Gallant Fraud

"Umhum, you and Joe Loomis were full of it, too, but I don't for the life of me see what Aunt Libby would have to do with it."

"Believe me, she has plenty. Listen." He told her succinctly, following the information by a detailed account of the morning's events.

Her breathless interest blacked out her own worries. "But Peter," she exclaimed, "what would have happened if you hadn't got there in time? Oh, poor Aunt Libby! Do you suppose the brute would have hurt her?"

"Maybe not physically, though a coward will go to almost any lengths. What I think he expected was that she'd break under his threats. Anyhow it doesn't much matter for he didn't succeed, and he hasn't another card to play."

She put her finger on the one weak point. "You don't think he will try to make people think she is insane? I couldn't bear to think of her being shut up in a hospital."

"It will be his word against ours and Gramp's. She's clearer mentally right now than at any time since I've known her. If we can manage to keep her happy and satisfied with me as a stand-in for Philip I very much doubt if she will slip any farther. There's even a

Gallant Fraud

chance, it seems to me, that she might eventually snap out of it, provided she isn't left alone to brood too much. Here's the store. I do hope Gramp isn't busy."

Amos was not. He heard Peter through in silence, frowning slightly at the end and saying, "I ought to of caught onto what Rogers might be up to, but I didn't think even he would go that fur. Well, you sure scotched him, and I hope for good, but if he should try anything else, we'll be waiting for him. She don't seem any worse for what she's been through?"

"As a matter of fact she seems better, but Gramp, I haven't told you the sequel."

Amos regarded the earnest young face from under shaggy brows and though his heavy features did not quiver Rhoda saw the glitter of eagerness in his deep blue eyes.

She stood watching them both, the old man she had known since knowledge first dawned in her and of whose integrity she felt as sure as of the solid ground beneath her feet, and the young one who only yesterday she had believed bore the same sterling stamp of worth. A pang twisted her heart. How could Peter seem so utterly straightforward and honorable when he was wilfully practicing such horrible deceit on her?

Gallant Fraud

It was past understanding. Was it past faith? For the first time since her world had been shattered to bits, she balanced the substance of things hoped for against circumstantial evidence. Here was a man who could, while acting a part, make it not only a credit to himself but an advantage to those who did not know who he was. Was she of them all, the girl he had said over and over that he loved, the only one he would go out of his way to harm? It didn't seem logical, it didn't seem even sensible.

"Peter," she called out to him silently, "it isn't like you in the least. It doesn't square with anything else you've been or done from the minute I laid eyes on you. I don't care how black the case looks against you. I'm going to wait until you tell me yourself there is someone else."

Amos was saying, "So there's a sequel, is there? She didn't tell you why she's been so sot, did she? You don't mean she signed the proxies?"

Peter took the envelope from his pocket. "No, but she gave me the stock certificates," he said.

Amos whistled. "Well, that's what you might call a haul. It kind o' puts you into the saddle, my boy. That is, if she means you're to have 'em."

Gallant Fraud

"I'm sure she does. The odd thing is, she doesn't seem to think they have any monetary value. She has the idea when stock stops paying dividends it becomes worthless. I'm going to see she gets every cent it's worth."

"Hum, that's right. Wouldn't wonder if she might not get a tidy little sum if the sale goes through."

"It will—that is, I hope it will."

"Wal, you hold the balance o' power now. I guess you'll have the last word," said Amos quietly.

Peter nodded. "By a lucky fluke. I can't take any credit for my freak likeness to Philip Ladd, and I hesitate to take advantage of it."

"This here is business," said Amos. "No need to be sentimental. You got them shares honestly enough and without any intentional tricks. Nobody could blame you for usin' them any ways you see fit."

"And that's exactly what I propose to do, Gramp. Whatever I may have thought when I first heard about this mill situation I've seen enough and more than enough since to show me you knew what you were about when you opposed the new dam site. If the Hamilton Mills still want to close the deal, I'm for their doing it on your conditions."

Gallant Fraud

Amos didn't answer immediately. His face was impassive. Only Rhoda, from her long knowledge of him, could tell he was deeply moved.

Finally, "You're sure you ain't makin' a mistake, boy? We've been kind o' close these last few days. I wouldn't want you should give up your own judgment or interests because of a friendly feelin' towards me."

"I could easily do that, Gramp, if my decision rested solely on inclination, but it goes much farther. I know you will do what is best for the valley. I take into consideration that you are not whole-heartedly anxious to have these mills at all. Personally, I think Hamilton's can do more for the place than you think, without bringing about conditions you quite rightly dread."

"Mebbe you're right. I guess likely we're due to see."

"It's up to you whether we do or don't," said Peter holding the envelope toward him. "If Aunt Libby had understood what it all meant, I know she would have given this stock to the man who has saved the valley. I am merely acting for her when I hand it over to you."

Gallant Fraud

Still Amos made no move, then as Peter forced the papers upon him, he stood leafing them through with his thick fingers, his eyes hidden. Presently he put them into the envelope again and thrust it into his pocket. He held out his hand to Peter, who took it in a firm grip. The two men stood silently linked.

At last Amos spoke. The words were simple but the tone rang like a clear bell. "Thank you, Jimmie. I guess I don't need to tell you I'm proud of the way you've shown you understand us folks here in East Joppa."

Then he quickly became practical. "There's one more thing I wish you would do. Of course this business can't be wound up in a day, but Joe Loomis has been terrible worried and knowin' about it will take a load off his shoulders. I'd like for you and Rhody to go over there and tell him right away."

"Of course," said Peter briskly, glad to have the emotional strain lightened. "Come on, honey. Let's get going."

Amos followed them to the car and watched them drive away. How long ago was it he had stood in almost that same spot pondering on the perversity of heredity? He had wanted a grandson he could be

Gallant Fraud

proud of. Well, he would keep his fingers crossed. Rhoda might attend to that, and a grandson-in-law with all the specifications would be welcome.

The telephone bell jangled and he went in to answer.

"That you, Amos?" said the voice at the other end.

"Yeah, what's on your mind, Ben?" Amos had recognized the cashier of the Bennetsville bank.

"You don't happen to be coming this way tomorrow, do you?"

"I wasn't, but if there's anything important I might bring it around."

"No need of putting yourself out, but if you should be in town, drop in to see me. Sort of casual, you understand. I don't want anybody to notice specially."

"Urson?"

"Now, now, Amos, don't go jumping at conclusions. I just want to talk things over. No—no—just gossip. No need to be alarmed. Can't talk over the wire. Be seeing you."

Amos hung up and stood staring with unseeing eyes at the old wall telephone. Well, he'd had his candy, now he'd have to take his medicine. The loving-kindness of an unknown boy, however much he meant now or might come to mean hereafter couldn't remove

Gallant Fraud

the galling fact that this other who was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone would probably never bring him anything but anxiety and humiliation. Ben had heard something, probably an authenticated rumor of whatever it was people had stopped talking about lately when they saw Amos himself coming. Urson had likely run himself into debt again. That being the case it wasn't fair for Ben to be expected to keep him on in the bank. Urson wasn't a thief, but if he couldn't look out for his own money folks wouldn't be too anxious to have him handling theirs.

Amos sighed. He had hoped things would be better. Since they weren't he'd have to figure out some other way to keep Urson going. Sometimes he wondered if he wasn't working from the wrong end. Didn't you do something undesirable to children by doing too much for them? Depended some on the child, he guessed. Rhoda, now, she'd never got spoiled. And this Jimmie who wasn't Jimmie? Easy to see he'd had everything done for him and yet he wasn't any parasite. The real Jimmie? What was he like?

He trailed off into another speculation. Funny how persistent that yearning of his was for a boy who wasn't enough interested in his old grandpa to answer

Gallant Fraud

a letter of invitation. Funnier still he would still go on wanting Jimmie Brown, no matter how many other children he had, though knowing Jimmie was as likely as not to bring just another disappointment.

“Ho-hum,” sighed Amos, “I guess at that I ain’t had it any harder’n Jacob and the rest o’ them old Bible characters. I-golly, I’d like to know real well what Jacob would of made out of Essie, I sure would.”

14



PETER stepped on the gas. His face was set. "Having him say things like that to me makes me feel pretty small potatoes," he told Rhoda.

"I don't know why it should," she replied. "After all, you've done something for him the real Jimmie never could have if he'd wanted to."

"Yes, but darn it all, he likes me, and he's thinking of me as his grandson. He's bound to be hurt when he finds out. I hate to lose his good opinion, too, looking at it from a selfish angle."

"Gramp isn't the sort to hold a small error up in front of a really fine action."

"The trouble is it isn't a small error," insisted Peter, who now he was getting a taste for self-immolation, chewed into it. "I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing. I've even kept things from you. I took advantage of your well-meaning device for my own ends. I asked you to

Gallant Fraud

trust me, knowing I was a double-crosser. I've made love to you under false pretenses. The lord knows St. Anthony himself couldn't help making love to you, but I should have waited until I was in the clear ——"

His words ran through her veins and into her heart like a trickle of glacier water, chilling and drowning the new-born faith she had just brought into life. She spoke thinly. "You—that is—there is some one who has a claim on you?"

"You might call it that, I guess," he said moodily, picturing Uncle Henry. "Well, I'll probably be able to confess all in a few days."

He drove on sunk in his own thoughts, mercifully oblivious to the devastating interpretation she was putting to those few chance sentences. Uncle Henry was likely to be slow in releasing him from his anonymity. When Uncle Henry got what he considered a cute idea he hung to it. This one had seemed particularly amusing to him, worse luck, and look how it had gummed things up! Peter couldn't do a thing with his hands tied like this. Take Rhoda, for instance. He wanted to ask her to marry him, but he'd be hanged if he'd do it under a false name.

And Rhoda was thinking, "Oh, darling, darling,

Gallant Fraud

there goes my last hope! What am I going to say to you when the time comes? If you had no right to make love to me, I had none to let you do it when I didn't know who or what you were. It's my fault more than it is yours. It's not Kay's or little Peter's at all. I've got to keep steady, I've got to. I mustn't let you do anything you'll be sorry for."

Around the bend the Loomis farm came into view, lying a-shimmer under the sultry haze of the mid-summer noon. The haying season was now in full swing and up from the meadows the heavy ricks were bringing the last loads of the morning before men and horses took their brief midday rest. Low in the west, like tossed heaps of raw cotton, clouds were piling higher and higher, blue shadows forming ominously in their folds. Men in the fields looked up at them, mopping moist brows and speculating stoically in the way of farm hands on the probability of showers. They wouldn't need to hurry as long as the storm was moving north.

Peter read in this scene only a pleasant rural quiet, which he felt grateful would be repeated many years to come, thanks to what he had learned since coming to the valley. But country-bred Rhoda knew that beneath the surface lay a threat.

Gallant Fraud

"If they aren't careful the rain will catch up with them," she said, "and the hay will be spoiled. Why, look! Surely that's Doctor Mason's car in front of the house. There must be somebody ill."

"Tough on Joe. Thank heaven we've got some good news to offset it," replied Peter, forgetting everything but sympathy for the heavily burdened young farmer. "Look, there he is now, talking to that driver. Hey, Joe!"

They climbed down simultaneously, starting toward Loomis who by this time had recognized them and was coming to meet them, the droop of his body more pronounced than ever.

Rhoda could not wait. "Joe," she called out, "what is it? Is Millie sick? Can we help?"

"Hello, folks," answered Joe, doing his best to force some sort of a welcoming smile. As he shook hands, however, the poor attempt flickered out, leaving his face bleak with despair. "I'm glad you've come," he said thickly. "No, it isn't Millie—it's Joey. He's bad. I— This is about the last straw, I guess. If he goes it won't matter what happens to the farm."

"Listen, man," said Peter. "I won't stop to explain how or why, but Gramp sent us over to tell you your farm's safe. Now tell us about the kid. What ails him,

Gallant Fraud

and what are you doing about it? Are you sure you aren't more scared than conditions warrant?"

"Yes," said Rhoda. "Perhaps you're just overworried about everything. You mustn't give up hope. There's so much can be done for babies nowadays."

"Doc Mason thinks it's mastoid infection," said Joe. "Joey's been ailing for some days. He was took bad last night. God! It don't seem as if I could stand it! It's terrible to see the little duffer suffer the way he does."

"Mastoid! But it isn't fatal if it's taken in time. I've seen a younger child than Joey come through it as good as new."

"Little Peter," thought Rhoda, but she brushed the thought aside. One must consider no one but Joey now. "Where's Doctor Mason?" she asked. "What does he say about it? Oh, there he comes now," as the spare, gray-haired figure came out on the porch. "Let's see what he has to tell us!"

Doctor Mason's tired face brightened at sight of the girl, but sobered at her question.

"He's a sick baby," he admitted. "Joe, you'll have to get him to a hospital. The quicker the better. I could operate myself, but I'm only an old G.P. I

Gallant Fraud

haven't had a case like this for considerable time, and I haven't the equipment. Joey needs a specialist with the latest methods."

"But where—" began Joe.

"It's too far to Boston," the doctor went on. "Time's a big factor, but there's a good hospital up to Milton, and Blair's a first class baby man. It's less than a hundred miles. If you'll get ready I'll call Blair and make the arrangements."

"You'll take Joey yourself?" inquired Peter.

"I can't, worse luck. Got another baby coming today over to Crofts. I have to stand by. You'll have to make the trip yourself, Loomis. I realize it comes pretty unhandy for you right in the midst of haying, but I guess you put Joey first. You've got to get there quick."

"How's your car, Joe?" asked Peter quietly. "Is it up to the job?"

Loomis spread his hands. "An old Model A? Maybe, they go through hell and high water, but ——"

Rhoda and Peter had exchanged glances and the latter nodded. He laid a hand on Joe's arm. "This is where your friends can be useful, old man," he said. "The Lincoln can do it, and she carries like a cradle.

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda'll go along with your wife to help her with the baby. I'll have them in Milton before the doctor has more than finished with the arrangements. You stay here and carry on. Remember what I told you. The farm's safe for you and your son. Now we're going to make the son safe for the farm."

"That's the talk," said the doctor, looking relieved. "I can promise you'll have a better than fifty-fifty chance if you start within the hour. I'll get right on the wire."

"Wait a minute," said Peter. "May I use it first? We're going to break all the speed regulations to flinders! We've got to have the state police on our side!"

"Get Gramp to handle them," said Rhoda. "He knows the head men and he'll have the road cleared."

"Fine! While I'm doing that, tell Joe more about the news we came to bring him. Come on, doctor!"

"Let Gramp know I'm going along!" Rhoda called after him and saw him nod.

"Joe," she said, returning to the dazed young farmer, "it's going to be all right, truly. Everything is coming out as it ought. Joe, dear, listen to me. Your luck has changed!"

Gallant Fraud

Gradually as she talked to him the tenseness of Joe's face relaxed, his head rose and hope lighted a new fire of confidence in his defeated eyes. He got up from the doorstep on which he had weakly collapsed a few minutes before, and began striding nervously up and down.

"Maybe you're right, Rhoda," he said. "It does look as if encouragement had come when I most needed it. I'd about got to the conclusion there wasn't any God, only a malicious devil that had it in for me. But now it looks different. If there is a God and He's given me back my farm when I thought it was lost, it don't seem like He would take my son I care so much more for away from me, does it?"

"It wouldn't even make sense," said Rhoda. "It's funny, but that's the one thing we never seem to give God credit for having—good plain common sense. Look, here come the men. Now I'm going in to help Millie and buck her up. Only think, Joe, we'll have Joey in the specialist's hands in a couple hours! He'll be out of his pain and on his way to getting well by midnight!"

Peter had driven fast before, but never at such speed

Gallant Fraud

on roads that turned and twisted up hills and into narrow valleys. Over and over he thanked his lucky stars for the flash of foresight that had prompted him to notify the police. Amos Burnham had grasped the idea at once.

"Sure," he had said, "I'll get through to headquarters right away. Griggs is a good friend of mine. You'll find his boys right with you!"

And they were, bringing with them a solid sense of comfort. The road would be clear. As the big car ate mile after mile Peter could see ahead of him the dawn-blue back of the big motorcycle cop and gratefully received the latter's salute as he sat poised by the roadside, having passed on his responsibility to a relieving officer. It was impossible though, at this rate, to glance for more than a split second away from the narrow black ribbon of highway slithering beneath his wheels. The heavy Lincoln did not transmit bumps easily, but this open country road in many places had received only first aid patching by gangs sent out to deal with spring frost heaves. In spite of all, the child whimpered and moaned as they passed over these spots and it took skill to avoid them.

They roared through villages where houses passed

Gallant Fraud

in a white blur, and people warned by the advance guard stood at gaze, wondering, some with mere curiosity, others with sympathetic wishes bred of a haunting knowledge this same thing might equally well happen to themselves and theirs, for the life of the little passenger in the big car.

They crossed bridges with a hollow roar, dipped down into woodland hollows where the engine purred like a full-fed tiger, and they saw the hills flatten before them under a sky that was becoming dark and menacing.

Peter's mind worked with the streamlined smoothness of his motor. He was catching a vision of something over and beyond the immediate issue in this act of saving the beloved child of a friend. He was helping establish a pattern that must not be lost to the future. Not establish, for it had existed from pioneer days—preserve was a better word, since it seemed to be forgotten by the theorists. There were other patterns crowding upon it in these dangerous days. Doubtful patterns, like the one the Sunday supplements had spread for the eyes of those who could see. That family of eight, all born since the father had gone on relief. Innocent victims, of course, but with

Gallant Fraud

dread potentialities. Small faces, blank for the writing of the future, dull eyes under narrow foreheads. Not their fault, but that of haphazard paternity, sponsored by reckless paternalism. Nevertheless a problem for the coming generation—for Joey, conceived in self-respect and a desire for intelligent living, Joey, who must not perish from the earth not merely because he was a well-loved child, but because he was the symbol of true democracy and a bulwark of America's future.

More villages, more bridges, the last hills. They thundered into Milton's outskirts as the clouds lowered still more ominously: The first drops of rain began to spatter down as Peter gathered the baby into his arms and carried him into the welcoming door of the hospital.

15



TRY them again," said Peter into the telephone. He rested his elbow on the shelf and listened to the muted chaos in the strange mechanized hinterland of the long distance service. "Yes, that's right, Loomis, Joseph. East Joppa, one, one, six, ring four."

"They don't answer," said the operator. "Sorry, sir, there's trouble in the Bennetsville division. The electric storm has broken the connection."

Peter hung up reluctantly and returned to the waiting room where the two women looked up at him hopefully. He shook his head.

"Nothing doing. The telephones are out. It would have to happen with poor Joe worried stiff. If we could only get word to him the little duffer's come through like the thoroughbred he is, what a relief it would be."

Millie Loomis smiled wanly. The deadly strain had

Gallant Fraud

gone from her face and there was peace in her eyes, but she showed what she had been through in the last hours. "Poor Joe," she said. "It must have been harder on him than on me, for I had knowledge of what was going on, at least. But Jimmie, you mustn't let this mischance fret you. You have done so much for us!"

"Can't you even reach Gramp?" asked Rhoda with a sort of sublime faith that Amos was above all telephone trouble.

"Nothing in East Joppa is answering. Great Scott, girls, do you see what this means? They must have caught the brunt of the storm. It was a humdinger here. Perhaps you didn't notice, but there was a while I was scared stiff the lights might go off during the operation."

"Oh!" Millie caught her breath sharply. There was a world of possibilities in the exclamation. "But they didn't go off, not once, and the doctor says Joey will be splendid."

"Right! He'll be as good as new in a week or two. The trouble with the wires probably isn't serious. They'll soon have it fixed and then we'll get through to Joe. But it's annoying. I hope Loomis got his hay in before the storm struck."

Gallant Fraud

"He was sure to," said Millie. "Oh, how I do wish he could know the baby is safe!"

Peter looked down at Rhoda. She was tired and she showed it. Her face was drained white and her hazel eyes almost black in its pallor, but she still bore herself gamely.

"How about it?" he asked her briefly. "Shall we go tell him?"

She nodded an answer as terse. "Of course, we must."

"But it's late and still storming," protested Millie, though her voice somehow suggested a hope her objection might be overridden. "You'd be much more sensible to wait till morning. Of course I'm going to stay anyhow. I—I have to, to be here the minute Joey wakes up and calls for me."

"Indeed you do have to stay," said Rhoda, "but we ought to be getting home anyway. Don't give us another thought. Keep them all for the baby."

Peter backed her with cheerful prevarication. "I promised Gramp I'd bring his girl back tonight. Have to keep my word or lose his good opinion. Well, we'd better be on our way. We have no police escort for the return trip."

Millie shuddered. "I'll never forget that ride. But

Gallant Fraud

what I'll remember still longer," she added with her old gentle smile, "is that we wouldn't have been in time if it hadn't been for you."

"Think no more of it," said Peter hastily. "I'll be back to see how you're coming along and I'll bring Joe if he can get away. As soon as the wires are mended I'll call you. Come, Rhoda."

At last they were alone in the starkly sterile corridor. Now there was no longer necessity for making an effort to be cheerful against odds, they both fell silent.

Over Rhoda poured a huge and smothering billow of emotional reaction, which, receding, left her numb in body and mind. Gradually she groped her way back to coherent thought. Only twenty-four hours ago how young she had been, how untried by life, how resilient! Even the family worries impinging on her happiness had been insignificant when set in the light of the great central fact of her love for Peter. But today she was old, grown abruptly to responsible maturity, and the girl she had been yesterday seemed an unthinking child. During the long hours of suspense outside the closed doors of the operating room, she had had time to ponder. She had seen love wring

Gallant Fraud

Millie's heart. She had realized how Joe was suffering as he waited at home and all because of love. But that was not all. She, too, had suffered and not vicariously. Joe's and Millie's pain was now resolving itself in happy relief. Hers would go on forever. In a little while Joey would be back in his parents' arms. Peter was receding from hers moment by moment.

She had watched Peter as he supported Millie through her ordeal. She had seen him ease her difficult situation with gentleness and an unfailing instinct for the right word and act. She had seen how tenderly he had lifted the sick child. All this was what she would be taking from Kay and little Peter if she clung to love. Little Peter was more than ever the great obstacle. There might be some justification in taking a man from another young and beautiful woman who could not hold him, but none in taking a father from his child. No, Rhoda knew definitely that she had lost to little Peter—to life. And intuition warned her it was more bitter to lose to life than to death.

She walked on now beside Peter, her body yearning dumbly for the comfort of his arms, for that last palliative to renunciation.

Peter saw the weary sag of the little figure. He

Gallant Fraud

stopped in the shadow of the vestibule and looked down into her face, worried question in his own eyes.

"I haven't any right to drag you out again, sweetheart," he said. "I'm going to take you over to the hotel and get you a room. You must go to bed and rest. I'll take the message through alone. What I said about promising Gramp was made up for Millie's benefit. He'll see the sense in your staying here. Besides, you'll be here to stand by Millie tomorrow morning until I can get back."

"Oh, no!" Rhoda's protest had a shrill note. "I want to go with you. Please, please, Peter, take me with you!"

"Why, darling, of course, if you feel like that. What ails you? You mustn't take Joey's illness so hard. He's going to be fine, you know. There, there!" He held her close, feeling the long shudders pass through her body.

"I can't help it," thought Rhoda, clinging to him. "I can't start tonight. It's no use trying to think clearly enough to argue and surely I won't be blamed for taking just this little when I've got to give up everything else."

"I—I'm only terribly silly," she choked out. "Don't

Gallant Fraud

mind me. I'll get hold of myself in a minute." She raised a wet face and made an abortive attempt at a smile.

Peter kissed her quickly but thoroughly there in the shelter of the vestibule. "You're not silly, you're sweet," he said, "and a darned good trouser besides. Well, then, let's go. We'll not make very good time on these slippery roads."

He was right. The night was very dark. Rain still fell gustily though the electric storm had passed. Only faint mutterings of thunder made themselves heard now and then above the throb of the engine, and the lightning was but a pale green flicker along the hills. The powerful headlights of the Lincoln drilled through the dense gloom, glittering on the wet highway until it shone with satin luster, reflecting from the rainsoaked and dripping foliage that walled them in. The windshield wiper sang its whining song. Gradually Rhoda found herself yielding to its hypnosis. She huddled closer against Peter's arm, trying not to feel, wanting only to make the most of the few brief hours of him she could call her own.

Peter took no chances with his driving. He did not like the looks of what he could see on the shoulder

Gallant Fraud

of this narrow highway. In places the road had been washed and he warily avoided the edge of the tarvia. In still other sections brooks which only that afternoon had been mere trickles in deep gutters were now rushing, grim and determined, swollen by the spring water that flushed in sheets over rocks and boulders, cutting loose soil wherever it got in the way. The sound of water was everywhere, a running accompaniment to the night hum of the motor. Here and there his lights picked out the dark menace of a tree leaning precariously, held by loosened roots, from a ledge. How long would it hold? He dared not think, but he was past the hazard. They were pushing steadily south and each minute the storm's havoc became more evident.

Against his arm Rhoda leaned more and more heavily. He slowed down and listened. Her breath was coming evenly. He was glad she could sleep, but if conditions got worse as rapidly as this he would need that right arm of his in his own business. He stopped the car and very gently shifted her weight to the back of the seat. She stirred and opened her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked drowsily, and then coming wide awake, "Why have you stopped? Has anything happened?"

Gallant Fraud

"Nothing, and I don't intend it to," soothed Peter. "You can cuddle down and drop off again. I was merely guarding against being caught out in a one-handed driving stunt, in case our friends the state cops happen to come along. The storm's been bad down here and they're probably patrolling."

Rhoda leaned forward and peered through the windshield. "Why didn't you wake me up sooner?" she said, startled. "Where are we?"

"About half way home, at a guess. We passed that dump of Simpson's five or ten minutes ago. That is, I figured it was the place. It looks different without the lights."

"The current must be off," she said. "They keep open nearly all night. Peter, I'm worried."

"There's nothing to worry about. Lights and telephones go out on any excuse in the country. Very likely a fuse is blown or some tree has fallen and yanked the wires down. I've seen a number that were all ready to topple."

"But you don't understand," insisted the girl. "I've lived in this country all my life, and I've seen what a cloudburst can do. The east fork always goes on a rampage. Don't you remember my telling you?"

Gallant Fraud

Peter remembered very well. He had not taken her word alone for it, but had talked with older inhabitants who had known the ways of the river still longer and more intimately. He had a very good idea of what might have happened below the old mill site.

"We'll not borrow trouble," he said, "nor waste more time. Now you're thoroughly awake you can help me watch the road. Keep your eyes on your side and look out for leaning trees."

Rhoda welcomed the diversion in spite of its implications. Outward danger to themselves and the anxiety over what might have happened to the valley acted as a counter-irritant to personal woes.

"Yes, let's get on," she agreed. "We'll know the worst in a few minutes more. Thank goodness this held off until we got Joey to Milton. Think what it would have meant to him if the road had been washed out earlier."

"Look," interrupted Peter, "there's a car on ahead. See the tail lights. That's the first soul we've come across since we left the last village. For the love of Mike, the fellow must be drunk! See the way he's weaving! Look out, man! Oh lord! He's done it!"

The little red spots girated madly. Peter stepped on

Gallant Fraud

his own accelerator recklessly and his headlights swept over the skidding car as it swung helplessly into the soft shoulder above a deep ditch, rocked wildly for a second and then rolled over and over, smashing through a fence and landing somewhere in the darkness of a field with a sickening crash.

"Stay where you are, dear!" commanded Peter, as he sprang out and made for the rift through which the other car had vanished. But he might as well have saved his breath for Rhoda was close behind him. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Okay then. Go back and get the flash. It's in the compartment. I've got to get at the ignition before it's too late."

It was already too late. An orange jet flicked sharply through the blackness, and in another second the wreck burst into flames.

"My God!" said Peter through his teeth. He leaped forward and stumbled. His foot had caught against a man's body sprawled on the sodden ground.

"Well, the poor devil got a break of sorts," he muttered, glancing at the fiery furnace that had once been car. "I hope he's the only one that needed it."

From the direction of the road came a hail and

Gallant Fraud

the hurried sound of heavy feet. A state trooper with his dripping poncho shimmering in the light from the fire slid down the bank and stood beside him.

"Anybody else in that car?" inquired the policeman tersely after a single glance at the body.

"I don't know. I only just got here," answered Peter.

"Have to find out. See if this one is alive, will you?"

He returned in a minute. "Nobody else in there, praise be," he reported while Peter ran an exploring hand over the victim and thrust it against the heart. "How about this one, buddy? Here, let me see."

"I think he's alive," said Peter. "He must have jumped. Shall I take a look around in case there's another lying anywhere?"

"Help me get this one up to the road first," said the trooper. "Take his feet. Easy now, while I roll him over. You got a car, of course. Guess you'll have to act as ambulance. All the wires are down and we can't get help. Steady—lift."

They bore the limp burden up the slippery bank. "Lay him down a minute," said Peter. "I'll have to fix the car. His legs aren't broken, are they? If they are it won't be so easy."

Gallant Fraud

"No," said the officer. "Hey, better tell the lady to keep back. This ain't no place for women unless they're trained nurses."

Rhoda heard him but she didn't stop. "I can help," she said, "if I'm not trained."

"You hold the torch," said Peter.

"Is it anyone we know?" she asked, switching on the beam. At that moment the wounded man's head fell back and they all got their first real view of his face.

"Oh! Oh! Urson!" gasped Rhoda.



URSON opened his eyes and groaned.

"You're going to be all right, old man," Peter encouraged him. "We'll take care of you. This is Jimmie, and Rhoda's right here."

Urson only groaned again and shut his eyes, but in another minute he made a louder outcry when the trooper laid an investigating hand on his shoulder.

"Must have landed on it," explained the officer. "Seems to be thrown out. I guess his collarbone is cracked too, from all appearances. Nothing else broken as far as I can tell, but we'd better get him to a doctor. Listen, buddy, was there anybody in that car with you?"

Urson mumbled feebly and incoherently.

"Let me," said Rhoda, pushing by the policeman and kneeling beside her brother. "Urson, dear, tell Rhoda. Were you alone? Essie wasn't with you?"

Gallant Fraud

"Alone," whispered Urson. "She's—cleared—out, damn her!" Rhoda hoped no one else had heard.

"He says there was no one with him," she relayed to the others. "Can't we take him home now? He's my brother," to the officer.

"You live around here, miss?"

"In East Joppa," supplied Peter. "He's Amos Burnham's grandson."

"You don't say?" The trooper brightened. "Not the guy that Simpson's girl married?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's a break. Simpson's place is only a bit up the road. We can take him there easy."

"No," said Rhoda wheeling around to face him as belligerently as if he had suggested throwing Urson into the fire. "We're going to take him straight home."

"Sorry, lady," replied the officer, "but the road's washed bad. We aren't letting any traffic through tonight."

"Then we'll go back to the hospital," said Peter. "Can you get a message through to Mr. Burnham, Officer?"

"Sure! The patrol will pass the word along. One way traffic will be established by tomorrow noon, too,

Gallant Fraud

and you can get through as soon as the feller's able to be moved."

"That's the best anybody can do," said Peter to Rhoda. "In a way it's not so bad. The hospital will give him a more thorough going over. X-rays if he needs them."

Rhoda made no protest. "Just as long as he doesn't have to be taken to that—that place," she said. And turning to the trooper, "Is there much damage down the valley?"

"Not as much as we were afraid there would be. The meadows are flooded quite deep. Some of the farmers lost their hay, and the road's damaged in that stretch close to the river where it always catches it. No trouble in the village and the water's falling now 'most as fast as it rose. Nothing but one of them flash floods, and I've seen worse of its kind."

They did not ask about Joe though he was in their minds. The trooper would hardly know what individual farmers had been out of luck. But Peter did see a chance to make a contact.

"If the patrol can manage and if it's not asking too much," he said, "could you let Joe Loomis know everything is okay at Milton? Just that. He'll understand. You know where he lives?"

Gallant Fraud

"No, but we can find out if he's on the main road." The officer made a note in his little black book. "Now if you're ready, let's see what we can do for this lad. I'll make my report and see your folks know where you are. The telephone company's got its men right on the job. You'll likely get a connection in a few hours."

Except for Urson's moans and mutterings answered by Rhoda's soothing voice, the trip back to Milton was made practically in silence. The rain had stopped at last and the moon shone intermittently through flying cloud rack. The storm had cleared away the sultry heat and the night was cool.

It was, of course, impossible to judge how badly Urson might have been injured, but his increasing fretfulness gave Peter a growing feeling that he had escaped the most serious consequences. Rhoda, too, was secretly convinced of this. Urson had never been patient when anything ailed him, and as a rule, the more trifling the trouble, the more irritable he was. Something in the sound of his voice now suggested he was more angry and resentful than suffering intensely.

A broken collarbone and a dislocated shoulder were plenty uncomfortable, Peter knew, for he had experi-

Gallant Fraud

enced both in his football days, but they were far from fatal. If Urson had been injured internally, though, he would not have the strength to snarl and snap as he was doing at present. With all due allowance for pain and shock, it took all Peter's self-control to keep from telling the fellow what he thought of the way he was lashing out at his sister. Mr. Urson Burnham was a darned nasty job, if anybody wanted Peter's opinion, family or no family. That ginladen breath was all anybody needed to explain how he'd happened to roll out of harm's way without more serious damage. Bum's luck.

Rhoda, poor kid! This was hard on her. After all, the young brute was her brother. She loved him—or seemed to. Here Peter frowned thoughtfully. If he'd been on his job as he'd promised, maybe he could have prevented this. However, in a way it gave him additional leverage. Also, it was going to tie Urson by the leg for a bit and give Peter a good chance to have things out with him. Yes, as soon as Urson was up to a good bull session he'd let him have it.

Rhoda was doing her best to quiet Urson. Since that first outburst he had not mentioned Essie, and she carefully avoided the subject herself. If Essie had

Gallant Fraud

gone—and she couldn't deny she half hoped it might be true—it was going to be horrible to have the sordid story broadcast through the village before Gramp was prepared for it. She must keep Urson from talking if possible. Gossip spread so like wildfire. Of course she would tell Peter at the first opportunity. Peter was a tower of strength. He would know what to do. He would break the news to Gramp and they two would see it reached the public in expurgated form if possible. But Urson mustn't babble, not even in Milton. He was Amos Burnham's grandson, and Amos Burnham might be news even that far from home. If the trooper had heard, for instance —

"There, there, dear," she soothed. "I know you're hurt, but we're almost there."

"I want a drink," snarled Urson. "Tell Fancy Pants to get me a drink if you won't."

"Shhh," said Rhoda. "They'll give you something to put you to sleep when we get to the hospital."

Urson muttered obscenely. The girl's cheeks burned in the darkness.

Peter spoke curtly over his shoulder. "Cut that out, my boy, or I land you at the jail infirmary instead of the hospital."

Gallant Fraud

"Please!" begged Rhoda.

"Sorry, but he's got to learn he can't talk like that to you, my dear."

Urson muttered again, but more circumspectly. In another minute they turned in at the now familiar hospital street.

At intervals ever since the storm struck, Amos had been trying to call Milton, but the line had gone dead and remained dead. As soon as the lightning had abated and the rain slackened, he had started out along the north road to see for himself the extent of the damage, news of which had spread rapidly through a village always apprehensive at any threat of freshet. He saw at once that this time the worst had not happened. The meadows looked pretty bad, but the flood had reached its peak and was subsiding. The loss would be confined to the hay and fodder corn. Too bad to have even that much on the debit side, but thank God it was about the last time. In another year the big dam would be there to regulate the flow, and the erratic old east fork would cease to be a perennial menace. With the new dam once in, it was reasonably certain the bill for the reservoir would go through the legisla-

Gallant Fraud

ture without a hitch. Amos already had enough votes sewed up, he believed.

With this prospect he could view the present limited havoc more or less stoically. Have to show Jimmie, he ruminated, what the old river could do when it got up onto its hind legs. Not a bad idea, come to think of it, to have a real good object lesson for him to see. Jimmie!

He chuckled throatily. Pretty cute the way he'd found out who the boy really was. His own guess hadn't been so far off, but he hadn't surmised the youngster was actually a Hamilton. Did Rhoda know? If not how had she got hold of him, and why the deuce had she played him off as Jimmie? He'd have sworn she didn't know anything about the mill proposition when she came home for the summer. Funny business all round. Well, he'd go on sitting tight. They'd have to come out with it one of these days. So far waiting had brought its own reward.

He'd never have got onto this Hamilton angle if he hadn't happened across Sam Gleason the other day over in Bennetsville. Sam was postmaster.

"See your granddaughter's got a new beau," said Sam after the usual interchange.

Gallant Fraud

"Umhum," said Amos noncommittally. "How'd you know? Seen 'em over here together?"

"Yeah, most every day. Feller gets his mail in my shop. What's the matter over to East Joppa? Don't Jim Farley let you have an office now-a-days? Must have one or two Democrats in your neck o' the woods."

"They was both in jail last accounts," returned Mr. Burnham pleasantly. "Got caught for votin' illegally."

"Haw!" replied Gleason, "more likely they was trappin' for Republican skunks. Well anyways, it's kind o' hard on young Peter Hamilton, though I guess going after his mail is a good excuse for taking his girl to ride."

Amos never blinked. "Sure! The kids don't miss a trick," he said easily. "Maybe he's heard stories about country postmasters' readin' postal cards. He wouldn't have nothin' on you in that respect, would he, Sam?"

"Go 'long," said Sam. "It ain't no use arguin' with a die-hard."

Well, no wonder the boy had taken up cudgels for the Hamiltons! He hadn't overdone it though. Made you think a darn sight more of him, the way he'd carried himself. Likely he'd come all primed to

Gallant Fraud

find a lot of old fogies trying to put a spoke in the company's wheel for no good reason, but he'd been man enough not to jump at conclusions. He'd looked into the situation and drawn his own. Not taking credit to himself, either, though it belonged to him all right. Peter Hamilton, eh? A good lad. It hadn't taken any Solomon to judge that from the beginning.

And Rhoda—she couldn't have done much better for herself if she'd known. Huh! How much did the little tadpole know? She and young Hamilton made a mighty good team. They pulled together like nobody's business. If it hadn't been for the Peter fellow's blue eyes they might have put it over on the old man. And now look at the way they'd stepped in and taken charge of Joe's baby. Poor old Joe! But things were bound to go a sight better for Joe and Millie from now on. If the little fellow pulled through they were going to be a lot happier. Hard on Joe tonight to have the wires down when he wanted to get word. Better stop and cheer him up a mite.

Amos parked his car at the foot of the muddy lane and picked his way over rain channels toward the barn, where the moving light of a lantern indicated he might find young Loomis.

Gallant Fraud

The latter hailed him with relief. "You ain't managed to hear anything, have you, Mr. Burnham?" he asked hopefully, inspired by the same confidence Rhoda had shown that Amos could somehow surmount obstacles to communication nobody else could penetrate.

Amos shook his head. "I guess we'll have to tough it through, lad," he said. "It can't be long now. You know the company don't let no grass grow under its feet."

"I realize that," admitted Joe, "but every minute seems an hour. You couldn't stop a spell, could you? It's the devil and all being alone and having nothing to do but think. 'Twas bad enough while there was work to keep me busy, but now it's getting dark, seems like I'll go crazy all by myself in that empty house."

"I guess Mira won't mind if I don't show up till late," said Amos. "She knew where I was heading for and she's got Libby to keep her company. We persuaded Libby to stay overnight when the storm struck. I had to promise to stop by and see to the cats before she'd agree. I guess you don't know about Libby, yet, do you?"

"No, what about her? Come on into the kitchen. You can tell me while I make a pot of coffee."

Gallant Fraud

"Well, it kind of beats all." He plunged into his tale and was glad to see that in his interest Joe for a moment forgot the heavy load of his anxiety. Encouraged, Amos rambled on from one item of village gossip to another. Gradually, under the influence of the hot coffee and genial companionship, Joe relaxed and became almost hopeful. He began to talk of the future, to ask Amos for advice about the purchase of additional pasture lands, and to speculate with him upon what the coming of the Hamilton Mills would do for business up and down the valley.

In the midst of their discussion a knock came at the door. When Joe answered the light fell on the uniformed figure of a state trooper.

"This the Loomis farm? A message from a young chap up the road. Everything at Milton is okay." Speechless with relief, Joe sank weakly into a chair again.

At the words "a young chap up the road" Amos came forward. It was then he got the rest of Peter's message.



MUCH as Peter had surmised, Urson's injuries turned out to be more painful than serious. In the judgment of the doctor it would have been perfectly safe for him to go home immediately. Peter took the responsibility for postponing the departure, however, not because he felt any compunctions over bouncing his soi-disant cousin over flood wrecked roads and giving his bruises a few extra twinges by way of good measure, but because Urson's continued hospitalization would give him a first class opportunity to talk turkey in no uncertain manner to that young recalcitrant. The time was more than ripe for this.

Rhoda had her own reasons for falling in with this arrangement, which had little or nothing to do with Peter's argument that she herself was thoroughly fatigued and must go home to rest.

"Of course I am about all in," she admitted, "and

Gallant Fraud

it's up to me to catch up with my sleep if I'm going to wait on Urson. I'll certainly have to wait on him, for though Miranda is a dear, her bedside manner is scarcely cheerful, and it would drive him frantic. As for ——"

"As for Essie's, it shouldn't be counted on," Peter finished for her.

"Peter, how did you know? Did you hear what he said about her?"

"Who, Urson? No, I was only speaking on general principles, as you might say. What was it?"

"You remember when I asked him if he was alone? Out where it happened, you know. He said she'd—gone."

"Hummm. Well, what of it? She may have gone home or ——"

"No, I'm sure he didn't mean that. He said, 'She's cleared out.' And he swore at her. I—I think he meant she's gone—with somebody—a man."

"Eloped! By George! I'm not altogether surprised. Miranda thought there was something like that in the wind."

"Oh, she told you that, too."

"She mentioned it along with other things. She

Gallant Fraud

doesn't exactly cotton to your sister-in-law, sugar, but she swears by you, and it's going to make her writhe to find out you are in on it."

"Poor old Randy! She still thinks I'm a baby ostrich. But Peter, I don't think Gramp realizes. We must break it to him ourselves."

"Maybe you overrate his innocence as much as Randy does yours. I have a hunch he has a very fair knowledge of Essie and the facts of her life. All the same this will be a blow in its own fashion. The accomplished act always is, no matter how much you expect it. Now, my child, I want you to leave this whole dirty mess to me. I told you the other night I'd see what could be done for Urson. It's too bad I got involved in other things and put it off, but I'll make up for lost time now. First of all, I'm going to take you straight to Randy. You let her put you to bed and fuss over you, then cuddle down and sleep the clock around. Your Uncle Peter is simply raring to finish the job up good and brown."

She was too tired to argue with him and so it came about that she never really knew what happened after he lifted her down at the parsonage gate and kissed her lightly. But she went to sleep with his last words in her mind.

Gallant Fraud

"Good bye, darling. The woods are thinning. We'll soon be out in the open where the sun shines."

He would have liked to get down to business immediately, but this he could not do. Gramp and Cousin Mira had been waiting too long as it was for an authentic account of what had happened. True the telephones were working again and he had been able to relieve them of suspense, but they would be full of questions. There was Joe Loomis, too, who rated more than the brief passing call. He had told Joe he would come back after he had taken Rhoda home. It would cheer him up to know how well Millie had come through. Millie, he could tell her husband without reservation, had been pretty wonderful and had looked that morning like a madonna who had changed her tears for smiles. For sheer pluck, he had decided, there was nothing like a Vermont girl. Yes, he owed it to the home folks to let them have all the details. He'd have to take a chance on getting to Bennetsville in time for his errands.

Fortunately most of the report about Urson could be combined with dinner. At last he realized quite suddenly how tired he was. He had slept only in snatches and had eaten very sketchily during the last

Gallant Fraud

twenty-four hours. Added to this was the strain of many miles of driving at high speed and over dangerous roads. As he sat down at the table he began to find it hard to concentrate. But the warm, comforting food and the restful atmosphere of the friendly kitchen soon put new life into him. By the time the meal was over he felt fit again.

"You ain't goin' out right away, be you?" queried Cousin Mira as he rose and made for the door. "You'd ought to lay down and have a nap. Your eyes look like two burnt holes in a blanket."

"Don't try to make an old man of me," he laughed. "Time enough for naps after I reach sixty. Look at Gramp, here. I don't notice you telling him to go lie down. Going over to the store, sir? Give you a lift?"

"Umhum," said Amos, catching the significant quiver of the young man's eyelid. "Be with you in half a jiff."

"Gramp," said Peter a minute later as he backed the car out of the drive, "I think I'd better tell you without mincing matters. Unless we mistook what Urson told us last night, it looks as if Essie had removed herself from the family picture gallery."

Amos took the news with customary stoicism. After

Gallant Fraud

a brief pause he said, "I ain't goin' to pretend, Jim. I reckon it's the best thing could happen to Urson."

"The talk around town isn't going to be pleasant."

"No, but we'll manage to stand it. We've stood a pile, I guess a little more won't hurt us."

His shoulders sagged imperceptibly. The lines of his face were tired. Confound Urson, thought Peter. He'd ridden those strong shoulders like an old man of the sea long enough. This was going to be the last time, positively the last, if Peter knew anything about it.

There was nothing more to say at the present. Having dropped Amos at the store, Peter lost no more time in heading for Bennetsville. There was still no letter from Uncle Henry at the post office. That no longer mattered to Peter. He had decided to act on his own judgment. If Uncle Henry didn't like it he would have to make the best of it. Peter had had all he could stand of double dealing. If no letter reached him by tomorrow noon he meant to lay his cards on the table. He wouldn't go on playing the hypocrite with a man like Amos Burnham. Neither did he intend putting off asking Rhoda to marry him. Whether she would do it after she knew he had lied to her about his name was

Gallant Fraud

a question, but he felt he could handle it. If by any chance she felt he had destroyed her trust in him—if her love for him was not great enough for forgiveness—well, it wouldn't matter much to him what became of the Hamilton Mills or Urson Burnham or Joe Loomis or the whole state of Vermont even.

His jaw set in a hard line. He threw himself into the transaction of his business with an incisive, machine-like efficiency that was to become a tradition in Bennetsville. Not until he reached home again did he yield to the creeping poison of fatigue which was steadily seeping through his every nerve and muscle. Once in his own room, he sank gratefully into bed and slept dreamlessly until the sun was high next morning.

He rose thoroughly refreshed and with his plan of action all the sharper cut for its sojourn in subconsciousness. He had no intention of letting it become muddled by outside influences. It required self-denial for him not to call Rhoda up, or to stop at the parsonage to find out how she had come through the night. The prime essential for him now was to see Urson alone and deal with him man to man, ruthlessly if need be. Leaving a message for Rhoda with Cousin Mira, he got into his car and again headed for Milton.

Gallant Fraud

The road was already under repair, and though the going was none too good, traffic was allowed to pass through. To Peter's interested eyes the miniature disaster easily suggested the details of a greater one. This was going to be another good selling point for the original dam site. He wished Uncle Henry might see it for himself, but since he couldn't, his own observations would be very useful. It was a pretty big thing to take responsibility for, but this morning Peter was taking on responsibility all along the line. Up to yesterday he had more or less allowed himself to drift. Now he was charting his own course though it meant pulling upstream instead of going with the current, and he rejoiced in the sensation of power this gave him. In this forceful mood he strode along the white tiled corridor of the hospital and came to Urson's room.

Urson was still in bed, his right arm strapped to keep the cracked clavicle immobile. Otherwise he looked quite himself. His eyes, it was true, still gave a hint of his recent heavy drinking and his color was a bit pasty. However, Peter figured it wasn't going to hurt him in the least to hear a few home truths and do a little figuring about his future conduct. Strategy, though, of

Gallant Fraud

which Peter had a well laid plan, prompted a wily approach.

"Hi, Urson," he said fraternally, "how's the boy this morning?"

"Rotten," said Urson. "Gosh, Jim, I'm glad you've come. See if you can get me a drink, will you? You'd think they'd never have heard of repeal in this dump."

"All in good time," said Peter, drawing up a chair beside the bed. "Meantime, have a cigarette by way of pick-me-up." He gave the invalid one and held a match for him, lit another for himself and leaned back, hands in pockets.

Urson puffed morosely. "I suppose you think I was drunk last night," he said.

"I know darn well you were," replied Peter agreeably. "I wouldn't wonder if you considered you had good reason."

Urson's face darkened still more. "You're right; I had. Plenty of it. Ess has lit out with that stinker, Jackson. Not that I care a damn about what becomes of the little trollop."

"After all, she's your wife," said Peter quietly. "A man doesn't foul his own nest."

"A man doesn't need to if she's around. She makes a thorough job of it," retorted Urson bitterly. "But

Gallant Fraud

that's not what gets me down. It's the way she's played me for a sucker. If it hadn't been for that she could go to the devil and welcome."

"It looks to me as if you asked for all you got," said Peter. "Why howl now it's handed to you? You knew well enough you were playing with fire when you started running with the Simpson crowd, didn't you?"

Urson's face took on a tinge of gray and a look of terror leaped into his eyes. "Listen, Jim," he began, "I don't know what you've managed to get hold of but ——"

Peter stubbed out his cigarette and leaned back again. "I know you've been gambling, for one thing," he said unemotionally. "If there's anything else and you want to spill it to me, consider it's all in the family."

Urson's hand trembled and scattered ashes over the counterpane. "God, Jim, do you really mean that?"

"I said it," said Peter.

"Well, I'm in the devil of a jam, if you want to know," confessed Urson. "It was bad enough before Ess ran out on me. Still, as long as she was living with me, Simpson wouldn't have put on the screws. Now he's come down on me like a ton of bricks."

"You owe him money?"

Gallant Fraud

"I did. I owe about everybody in Bennetsville, too. That's what she did to me."

"Anything else?"

Urson swallowed hard and if possible his color became still more sickly. "I—oh lord, yes," he groaned. "Jim, it wasn't my fault, I swear it wasn't! Simpson cracked down on me and I had to have the money. I'm not a thief, but there wasn't any other way to get it. If you'll help me out of this, I'll ——"

"So you took the money from the bank?" asked Peter bluntly.

"I—er—borrowed ——"

"Yes, I understand," said Peter grimly, "that's the way it's usually euphemized—by embezzlers."

"But I meant to put it back, I vow I did."

"So do they all," said Peter. "Now let's come right down to cases. How much did you falsify your accounts for? Don't hedge. If I'm going to see this through I want cold facts."

"Five hundred dollars," said Urson. "I tell you, Jim, it wasn't my fault."

"Skip it," said Peter. He took out a checkbook and a fountain pen. "I'm going to give you this now. Then we'll call the nurse and have you dress. I have the

Gallant Fraud

doctor's permission to remove you. After that I'll drive you over to Bennetsville and you can get the cash back into your account before closing time."

He blotted the check and laid it on the counterpane. Urson picked it up with trembling fingers. His eyes devoured it, but all at once his features sharpened.

"What's all this about?" he asked. "How come you sign your checks Peter Hamilton?"

"It happens to be my name," stated Peter.

"Oh it is, is it? Why you—you're an impostor. What are you pulling anyhow? I always did think there was something fishy about the way you turned up. You're trying to gyp the old man out of that stock, are you? No wonder you're willing to pay me a miserable five hundred bucks. You think I'm going to let you get off that easy?"

Peter leaned over and grasped Urson's wrist in a grip that paralyzed the latter's fingers. The check fluttered out of them and he picked it up, tearing it across.

"I had a premonition you might prove yourself that kind of a louse if you had a chance," he said. "I'm sorry, but I guess we'll have to let the bank examiners carry on from here."

Urson writhed. "Listen," he pleaded. "I didn't mean

Gallant Fraud

anything, Hamilton. God, I was only fooling. Can't you take a joke? You wouldn't get me to come clean and then let me down? Look, you're sweet on Rhoda, aren't you? You don't want anything to happen to me that'll disgrace her. Give me back the check, there's a good fellow, and I'll promise— Don't let me go to jail. I—I can't stand it!" He broke into weak sobs.

"Okay," said Peter. "Now I guess the decks are cleared. I've got a proposition to make to you, Burnham. It is, if I may put it bluntly, a take it or leave it choice. Take it, and I put your house in order for you. Leave it, and you go to jail, where it is my private opinion you would get a much needed lesson. I want you to understand absolutely that I am not doing this for your own sweet sake. I am considering Rhoda and Gramp entirely—I should include your father, whom I do not yet know but hope to have close relations with soon. You get my point, do you?"

Urson nodded shivering.

"Now for a few more practical items," continued Peter. "The bank already knows of your shortage. I saw Mr. Prentiss yesterday afternoon."

"B-but how ——"

"How did I know? I didn't, but I knew you were

Gallant Fraud

in Simpson's clutches, and you had a distinct aroma of rat about you. Mr. Prentiss was most kind. He agreed to let me make up the deficit and keep the knowledge of your dishonesty from your grandfather. He has been worried for some time over your activities and was relieved to do this. He feels the injustice of having Gramp bear the brunt of your—er—mistakes as he so often has in the past. I also have a full rendition of all bills on your current accounts in the village. They will be settled as soon as I have your written agreement to the conditions I am now going to present to you."

"W-w-what have I got to do?"

"Nothing you won't find entirely easy. The first thing is that you must resign from the bank. The second, you are to get out of town at once."

"But where am I to go? I haven't a cent. My car is smashed."

"I'm buying your ticket," said Peter, "and buying it to Seattle. If there were any point farther from Vermont available for practical purposes I should choose it, but as there isn't, Seattle will have to answer. You will probably like the climate. Most easterners are enthusiastic about it."

Gallant Fraud

"I can't eat the climate," whined Urson.

"You won't have to. I hope it is going to inspire you to find yourself a job, but to insure the city against having you on relief, I'm going to put one of a sort where you can use it if you choose. Here is the address of the manager of our Seattle branch office. Present the card and he will put you to work at a fair and respectable wage."

"I'm not a lumberjack," fumed Urson.

"Don't forget what you really are," warned Peter. "You might find it difficult to find any opening if it were known. This is not hard or disagreeable work. If you do it honestly there is nothing to prevent your promotion to something more desirable. In fact, this is the first rung of a very decent ladder for you and you're being given a clean slate for the start. It's up to you to make good."

"What are we going to tell Gramp?"

"Nothing except that I'm offering you a job out west. He'll probably be delighted to know you have ambition enough to take it. Don't forget he's an old man. He won't always be here for you to fall back on."

"And if I don't choose to fall in with your fine plan?"

Gallant Fraud

"Be assured I won't for a minute stand in your way if you prefer a stretch in the pen. On the whole, I think you will find Seattle much more attractive."

"Oh, all right. I guess you've got me licked," said Urson.

"At the risk of seeming to preach," returned Peter, "I'd like to suggest that when you're on your back on the ground there's practically nowhere to go except up. Now if you'll take this pen and sign on the dotted line, I'll call the nurse to witness."



THOUGH Rhoda had not precisely slept the clock around as Peter had suggested, she had given a very good account of herself. She was wide awake and thinking of getting up, however, when Miranda pushed the door gently open and insinuated a sharp nose and a glittering eye around its edge.

"Come on in, Randy," she called. "I'm fully conscious and in my right mind. Is it awfully late, and have I kept breakfast waiting?"

Miranda entered with a negating sniff. "Breakfast! You don't suppose I got no great setout for myself, do you? *She* ain't showed up since she went off yesterday, and Urson's where he is. I don't git victuals when there's nobody to eat 'em, bein' no sinful waster. But you lay still where you be and I'll bring you a tray in he jerk of a lamb's tail."

Gallant Fraud

"No, don't," said Rhoda. "I'll come down. There's a lot to do before Urson comes home and we've got to make plans besides."

What was more difficult, she thought, as she dressed rapidly, was that Miranda had to be told about Essie. She quite evidently smelt trouble on the wind. Miranda's personal opinion of Urson's erring wife was going to lead to considerable plain speaking unless all signs failed. But one had to get used to that. Miranda wouldn't be the only one, by any means, who would wield a sharp tongue. Gossip would run its course. Rhoda sighed as she brushed her shining hair and tied it back, taking not so much as a glance at the mirror. Peter would have told Gramp by this time, and that would mean Cousin Mira knew. She wondered if the news had yet reached the neighborhood.

Miranda took it with surprising mildness. "I ain't sayin' I didn't expect 'twould come to this sooner or later," she said, "but I did hope it wouldn't happen till you were off to college again. It ain't a fit thing for a young girl to be mixed up in."

"I don't feel like a young girl," said Rhoda.

"Well, you be, feel or no feel. If it weren't for your

Gallant Fraud

havin' to bear the brunt along with the rest of us, I'd make no bones of sayin' 'twas good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I'm glad Dad's out of it. The worst of the gossip will have died down before he gets home."

"Ummm, yes, it's good there's somebody that can get off easy. I guess it's as well it's him. He'd take it real hard, though land knows it's as much his fault as anybody's. If he hadn't of ben so unworldly and dumb about Urson in the first place things might of ben a pile different."

"Please don't blame Dad," said Rhoda. "It's not his fault he believes everybody is as good as himself. Has P—I mean Jimmie been over this morning?"

"No, he ain't, and when I called up Mira she said he'd started for Milton again, and to tell you he left word he was goin' to bring Urson back with him."

"Then we'd better get the front room ready."

"I'll tend to it. You ain't goin' to lift a finger to it if I know myself. The place needs a regular go-down and it's going to do me good to get in and make things fly. As long's it's the last mess she'll ever make in the house, I'm pleased enough to clean it up. Where shall I put the stuff she's left?"

Gallant Fraud

"Oh, stick it into the box room," said Rhoda yielding. It was no use arguing with Miranda when she was on a rampage. "You make me feel so useless, Randy."

"You go 'long and be useful to your grandpa, then," ordered Mrs. Perkins. "He's likely to need somebody sensible to talk to. Miry's apt to of flown off the handle and got to sputterin' like butter on a hot griddle."

Rhoda thought it might be quite a relief to do likewise, but she kept her counsel. She longed for the alternative release hard physical work would have given her, but Miranda was all but pushing her out of the house, and there was nothing to do but go. She got her bicycle from the shed and pedaled off toward the store, Ersatz, who had felt more or less neglected for the last day or so, pacing briskly beside her. Gramp, she surmised, would have got away from Cousin Mira as soon as possible. He was probably finding refuge from the flood of chatter in that small, junk-crowded cubicle he called his office.

It came to her as she mounted the bicycle that she had not been on it since that eventful day on which she had sallied forth all unwitting to complicate her whole life by a sudden impulse for what, looking back, seemed a childish trick blindly unregardful of conse-

Gallant Fraud

quences. She had long since ceased to excuse herself on the grounds of saving Gramp his disappointment over Jimmie.

"I would never have thought of doing it," she admitted starkly, "if I hadn't wanted Peter for myself. It's no use trying to hide behind an altruistic motive. I should have been honest with myself. There must be something wrong with a girl who would deceive herself so and use such raw methods. I blame Essie for following her instincts and Urson because he can't resist temptation, but what did I do when the test came? Why, I didn't even want to know about Peter, for fear knowing might spoil my chance of getting my own way. I'm being justly punished for what I did, but oh, the punishment hurts all the more terribly because I know I deserve it."

There was no gay twinkle in her feet today. Satz found it not only easy to keep up but possible to make forays into intriguing dooryards and still not lose sight of her. She forged straight ahead, wondering unhappily how many hidden eyes behind drawn window curtains were watching her passing, how many tongues were rolling the sweet morsel of her family troubles over and over.

Gallant Fraud

This was going to be terribly hard on Dad, if he did miss the worst of it. Poor Dad! Everybody loved him and that would help some. He would be more pitied than criticized. Rhoda winced remembering what Miranda had said. There might be a few who would think the same if they didn't say it. They would be right in a way. She could remember so well those first lonely months after her mother's death when John Burnham had shut himself into his study with his personal grief, leaving his children to seek comfort with Gramp. She had found it, but Urson had been older; he had found other diversions. If Dad had made Urson a companion then, might it not have been different now? But what was the use thinking of that? And what was going to be done now the reckoning was upon them?

It wasn't fair to expect Peter to take responsibility for Urson—not now. You couldn't send a man out of your life forever and still expect him to shoulder your family burdens. It was up to her and to Gramp from now on. Perhaps if she went away with Urson herself, into some place where nobody knew them, Urson might get a fresh start. She would stand behind him, she was willing to devote her life to Urson. He would

Gallant Fraud

be the reason for her existence, for there would never be any other reason now. There was no spring left in her as she dismounted at the foot of the steps and with Satz at her heels crossed the stoop and went into the store.

Amos was exactly where she had expected to find him. He swung around from his cluttered desk, the old swivel chair creaking under his weight.

"Hello, little girl," he said, his eyes lighting. "I kind o' thought you'd be around to see Gramp pretty soon."

"Hi, Gramp," responded Rhoda, leaning down to lay her smooth cheek against his rough one. "Randy scatted me out, or I wouldn't have been. She seemed to think you might be able to put up with me."

Amos reached up and patted her. "Reckon I can always do that," he said. "Randy ain't a real meller character, but she has some kind thoughts. Set down if you can find a place to perch. Here, I'll shove that mess off the chair for you." He suited action to words and Rhoda dropped down mechanically.

"Suppose they told you Jim's gone to fetch Urson," Gramp went on cheerfully.

"Yes," said Rhoda.

"Umhum, that boy's sure been a great help. Dunno what we'd of done without him."

Gallant Fraud

"Maybe we've taken more from him than we ought," suggested Rhoda in a thin voice and bent over to adjust her sandal strap.

Amos saw the quick color flood her face, but he knew better than to ascribe it to her position. "Well," he replied casually, "I s'pose likely we have in some ways, but then, he's one o' the family, ain't he? You couldn't expect he'd stand by and take no interest."

"N-no."

Now was the time to confess, but how could she? To tell would be to cut away from Gramp what was very evidently solid comfort in his supposed grandson. Besides, what right had she to give Peter away when he wasn't there to defend himself for his own part in the impersonation? He had said the woods were thinning. He knew what he was about. She had got them into this mess, but if he wanted to get them out of it it was only fair to let him have his way. Hers hadn't been so good to date. After all he had done for everyone in the valley, and after what he proposed to do for Urson though she might not let him now, it would be unjust indeed to have him come back to find Gramp considered him an impostor. Above all, Gramp must not suspect what Peter meant to her and what his going would do to her. Gramp might resent that most of all.

Gallant Fraud

Amos was puzzled. Usually when he had invited confidences from Rhoda he had got them. She must know he wouldn't blame her for a well-meant hoax, and he'd made it as easy as he could for her to own up. How far did he dare go, how far could he go without letting his own cat out of the bag?

"Hmmm, yes," he said. "I guess you and me kind o' misjudged Jimmie 'fore we knew him."

"You like him, don't you, Gramp?" She had to say something.

"Yeah, I like him fine." He paused and wiped his glasses. When he spoke again he did not look at her but out of the window at Mount Tabor, clear cut and eternal against the bright blue sky. "Yeah, I guess I more'n just like him. I respect him. Even if he wa'n't my own flesh and blood, I'd think a pile of him. He's the kind of feller a body trusts. Don't 'pear as if he'd ever do a mean thing."

"How can you be so sure—of anybody? Suppose you found out he'd been quite different—I mean that he'd kept hidden something he should have told."

The old man's face remained impassive. "Well," he said, "when it comes to that I dunno who's got the ight to say what a body shall tell. Most of us have a


Gallant Fraud

few corners we don't want the light to shine too fur into at all times. I guess that's the way folks were meant to be. I reckon it would be dumb uninterestin' if everybody knew everything about the other feller. There'd be nothin' left to speculate about. As for Jimmie, I wouldn't worry none about his secrets. Leastways I'd want to hear his side o' the story before I passed judgment on 'em. I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for any circumstantial evidence 'thout 'twas proved. No siree, I wouldn't."

Rhoda swallowed hard and blinked. Her eyes stung with unexpected tears. Peter's side of the story! Why, she'd never given him credit for having a side. Her side and Kay's, yes, and little Peter's most of all, but she'd been willing to condemn the man she loved unheard on a chance-discovered line of handwriting and a baby's picture.

She smiled mistily at Amos. "I wouldn't either, Gramp," she said. "No siree, I wouldn't."

19



PETER drew up before the parsonage and helped Urson out of the car. He looked eagerly toward the house for Rhoda but he did not see her. Instead Miranda, looking particularly grim, came out on the porch.

"We wa'n't expectin' you quite so soon," she said ungraciously. "Come along in. Rhody's gone over to your grandpa's to get some things Miry's cooked for Urson's supper. 'S if we was dependent on the neighbors for our victuals!"

Urson grinned wryly. "You ought to get yourself a job as official greeter, Randy," he said. "The prodigal's return was never like this."

"Want to go right to bed, Urse?" asked Peter hastily. Young Burnham's mood had grown less sullen during the long drive from Milton and the excursion to Bennetsville. The two had come to a better and

Gallant Fraud

more friendly understanding now Peter's need for being hardboiled was over. He didn't want Urson to slip back into the old slough of self-pity and self-excuse.

"Your room's all ready," said Miranda. "I've moved her things out and cleaned it thorough."

"I don't want that room," said Urson flatly. "I'll stay down stairs a while and you can fix me a bed in the one where I used to sleep."

With Peter's help he got stiffly up the steps and into the sitting room where he sank with a stifled groan into the big easychair. He fumbled for a cigarette, accepting a light with a casual nod.

"I'll be all right now," he said, adding as Miranda withdrew kitchenward, "You don't have to police me, Hamilton. The old girl's an able deputy warden even if I had any inclination to run out on you. I didn't expect her to coddle me, but I'm hanged if she's going to stick me in any place where I'll be reminded of Ess all the time. You go on over to Gramp's and find your Rhoda, as I can see you're dying to. Some folks have all the luck."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. Peter ignored the bitterness of these remarks and stood a minute look-

Gallant Fraud

ing down at the handsome, pallid face. The elusive family resemblance to Rhoda tugged at his heart. He'd been tough with Urson because only toughness would get through his skin. Urson was that way. He didn't want to be reminded even now of what was over, because he still didn't believe it was his own fault. How many times in the future would this same weakness get the better of him? Was it going to be possible to save Urson from himself? Peter sighed. He'd have to keep at the job for Rhoda's sake and Gramp's.

"I'll be back as soon as I've told them you're here," he said.

"Okay," murmured Urson. "I told you I wouldn't run out on you."

Peter went.

Amos was restless after dinner. He had left the work at the store to his helper and had not returned. He put in his time pottering about the yard and garden until the middle of the afternoon and then with his hands full of fresh-picked vegetables he went into the kitchen where Mira was putting the finishing touches to a monumental cake with heavy chocolate frosting.

"For the land sakes," exclaimed the housekeeper, "what was you expectin' me to do with that great mess

Gallant Fraud

of stuff, Amos Burnham? I've got more'n I can cook a'ready, and you know garden sass ain't fit to eat when it's wilted."

"Well," returned Amos mildly, "it ain't fit to eat when it gets too big for pickin' neither."

"I'll have to call up Mirandy and tell her to send Rhody over after it," said Mira as if he had never spoken. "She can likely use part of it anyways, and I've got a tapioca cream for Urson. You'd better get washed up. You're all over garden muck and you wouldn't want anybody to come in and see you."

"Good honest dirt," said Amos, but he went obediently to the sink and filled a basin with hot water while Mira took down the receiver. He had barely finished his ablutions and was still damp from toweling when the front doorbell rang.

"There," said Mira, "what did I tell you? And me with my dress not yet changed."

Amos grinned. "And a streak o' choc'lit onto your nose," he said. "Never mind, you've got me all shined up. I'll go."

He proceeded with considerable moderation through the sitting room and along the hall. Before he reached the door the bell shrilled a second time.

The rooms through which he passed had been care-

Gallant Fraud

fully shaded against the warm afternoon glare by Mira. Now as he opened the door into the full face of the sun he was momentarily blinded. Through a sort of haze he could see only that there were two people standing under the narrow portico. As his vision cleared, however, he made them out to be a very large young man and an absurdly tiny young woman alert and like a dark flame. Amos found himself all at once stirred by the resurgence of a long-forgotten boyhood thrill which he had once known at the annual summer advent of the dancing cinnamon bear led through the village street by the little smiling Italian with flashing white teeth. He was even a little taken aback when it was the bear that spoke.

"Is this Mr. Amos Burnham's house?" asked the very large young man.

"It is," said Amos, "and if you were wanting me, I'm him."

"You've probably given up expecting me," announced the stranger, "and the girl's been telling me you ought to have given up wanting me, but ——"

"For goodness sake, hon," interrupted the small dark flame, "tell him who you are. He's trying to say he's your grandson, Jimmie Brown, and I'm Beryl,

Gallant Fraud

and the reason we didn't get here before is we've been busy getting married, and now ——"

Amos stepped back and opened the door wide, "And now you come straight in," he said. "We'll start makin' up for lost time right away."

He ushered them through the hall to the sitting room, Beryl convoying Jimmie like a fussy young tug nosing a good-natured ocean liner into its berth.

She chattered steadily as she worked her husband along. "The minute he told me about your letter," she said, "I said to him, 'Why, Jimmie Brown, do you mean to tell me you've got a perfectly good grandfather back east, and that you've never been to see him since you were a baby? Why,' I said, 'of all things! You ought to be ashamed of yourself. We're going to see him right straight away. We'll take our honeymoon trip to New England and we'll make him a nice visit. I'd never forgive you if you didn't take me to see him, I mean I definitely couldn't. I never had a grandfather of my own to remember and I'm not going to miss my chance.' And so here we are. We're going to Franconia, but right now here we are."

"Yes," said Jimmie beaming down on her with a face like a benevolent full moon, "here we are."

Gallant Fraud

Amos went across the room and snapped both window shades to the top. "I got to have a good look at the two of you," he explained. "Well, well, well, well. I don't know when I've been so tickled over anything. I swan, I'm about knocked all of a heap, but I-golly, I'd know them brown eyes of yours most anywheres, boy, if it has ben over twenty years since I seen 'em."

Beryl chortled, "What did I tell you, sweetie pie? Haven't I always said you were still just like your baby pictures? But look at the size of him, Grandpa? Isn't he simply gorgeous? You just ought to hear the fans of the other team groan when he trots onto the gridiron. He simply slays them."

"I'll warrant," said Amos. "Now you set down, Beryl. Jim, you'd better go bring your bags in. I'll tell your Cousin Miry to get your room fixed up."

"We left the luggage at the hotel in Bennetsville," said Beryl. "We didn't know how you'd be fixed for having company so unexpectedly."

"Can't have you puttin' up at hotels after all the time I've been honing to see you. You belong right under this roof. Hey, Miry."

"Cousin Mira's gone to change her dress, Gramp. Can I do something? Oh ——"

Gallant Fraud

Rhoda had known something was going to happen the minute she had seen that car in front of the house. What was another Wisconsin number plate doing in East Joppa unless—? Her blood froze. It must be Kay. Kay had found out where Peter was and had come to claim him. She'd come to Gramp and Gramp mustn't find out until Peter himself was there to explain. How was Rhoda to keep him from it? She had to do something, she must think fast, but first she must see this other girl to whom Peter belonged.

She pushed past Cousin Mira who was making curious and futile gestures. Then she stopped short on the threshold.

For this was not Kay—at least, it was not the girl of the picture. Then she heard Gramp's voice coming as it seemed from a vast distance.

The spirits of Amos Burnham were riding high. "Come in, come in," he boomed joyfully. His eyes twinkled merrily, for this was a big moment. The youngsters' joke had turned boomerang. "Come right in and meet the folks. This here's your Cousin Jimmie, Rhoda, and this is Beryl who's married him. Stoppin' over to see us on their weddin' tour, can you believe it? Rhody's been terrible interested in you, Jim. Why,

Gallant Fraud

she actually ain't been able to wait till you got here."

Rhoda never was able to remember how she got through those first few minutes. She had a more or less distorted impression of a Jimmie who filled practically two-thirds of the room with his handsome big body and pleasant, not particularly intellectual face chiefly notable for the kind brown eyes like a friendly cocker spaniel's, and of a Beryl, trim and chic and vivid as a scarlet tanager. She heard herself speaking a cordial welcome and felt the pressure of hands. It couldn't be real and yet it was. Why had it not occurred to her this sort of thing could happen? After twenty years, Jimmie would have to turn up at the worst possible minute!

Jimmie looked down at her with laughter dancing in his pleasant eyes. "Say, Grandpa," he said, "why wasn't I told about this? How come you never played up the local attractions?" He stooped and kissed her.

"Hey, listen, Mr. Gable," giggled Beryl, pushing him aside, "did I wed a sailor or what? Darling, I don't blame him. You'd take any susceptible male's eye." She kissed Rhoda in turn with enthusiasm. "It makes everything simply perfect to have a nice girl cousin.

Gallant Fraud

"We'll be—" She ended with a squeak like an astonished mouse.

"Why *Peter*, *Peter Hamilton*, what in the world are you doing here?" She darted across the room and threw herself at Peter who stood amazed upon the threshold, kissing him with more abandon than she had shown in her embrace of Rhoda.

"S-a-a-y!" drawled Jimmie, "what's all this and who was just mentioning sailors?"

Beryl tugged at Peter quite as she had a minute or so ago at her husband, pulling him into the circle. "Keep still, goon," she warned the latter, "until I solve the mystery of the handsome lumberman. Pete, you're absolutely the last person I expected to find here. Give an account of yourself. How did you happen to know Jimmie's people and why are you under the ancestral roof? Where are you going from here and how are Kay and the baby and—well, why don't you *say* something?"

Jimmie guffawed and Peter joined in the laugh. He seemed completely unembarrassed. But Amos looking at Rhoda saw her face grow rigid and paper white.

Kay and the baby, he thought. So that was the hitch, was it? She'd fallen for young Hamilton and she

Gallant Fraud

knew he had a wife and baby. He wouldn't have believed Peter— Well, hold on! It didn't look too good, but there might be some explanation. The boy didn't act now as if he'd done anything to be ashamed of. Taking it as easy as an old shoe. If he'd hurt Rhoda, though, let him look out. Amos moved instinctively closer to his treasure. The joke had gone about far enough.

"Kay's fine," Peter was saying, seizing a moment when Beryl had paused for breath, "and little Peter's the eighth wonder. They're in Maine this summer."

"Will you listen to that!" Beryl was on the line again. "Jimmie, my lad, we've certainly got to see them before we go back. Let me tell you, believe it or not, I lived two years with this glamour boy's picture on my dresser and you, darling, should be thanking your rabbit's foot, or whatever, I survived to fall in love with a great hunk like you. How I ever escaped I don't yet know, and I guess I did have a pretty bad case especially at the wedding ——"

"Hold everything," interposed Jimmie, "I'm kind of dumb. Tell me one thing at a time. Am I supposed to fraternize with this guy or take him behind the barn and beat him up?"

"I *am* telling you," said Beryl, "and you're only

Gallant Fraud

putting on an act about being slow. This big beautiful's twin sister Kay was my roommate at school. I was her maid of honor when she got married to Fent Belding. I should think you'd have gathered that, and now she's got the most terrific baby and everything. And now I'm simply popping to know why you're here, Peter. Do go on and tell me and are you stopping on your way to see Kay?"

Amos felt the load that had rolled over his spirits a minute before dissolve and float off into thin air. "Hamilton's been here on business connected with his firm," he answered for Peter. "They're takin' over the property of a mill I used to be interested in, so he naturally put up with me while he was lookin' the situation over. We've got real used to havin' him around. He's been like one o' the family."

He shot a smile of amused warning across to Peter, who met it with a flicker of understanding and gratitude. Both men were chiefly concerned with Rhoda, who leaned against her grandfather's arm, feeling much like a spent swimmer over whom heavy seas have poured and who at last dazed and weak finds himself with the miracle of solid earth under his feet again.

This, then, was what Peter had meant when he

Gallant Fraud

talked about deceit and not being free. Nothing but this! How utterly stupid of her not to have pieced together all those bits of evidence she would have known pointed to it if she hadn't been blinded by fears for her love. Why, she ought to have known from the very first he had some business in East Joppa. Hadn't he been asking the way to it? And then there was his sudden about-face and his accepting of her crazy scheme as soon as he found out Gramp's name was Burnham instead of Brown. Why hadn't she guessed his avid interest in the dam and his insistence on the Hamilton integrity had more than superficial meaning? With a queer trick of memory, there came back, too, with photographic clarity his hesitancy over telling her his name was Belding. Oh, it was all so clear now, so clear! She had all but held the key to the whole secret in her own hand that morning she had shown him the valley and had seen how he looked after talking with Joe. She had even asked him what the dam meant to him and had let it pass because he had said, "Now you're asking me, Elsa." Poor, foolish Elsa! Well, her own fate was a happier one. She had suffered her black moments, but her present happiness shone all the more brightly for them.

Gallant Fraud

Color was creeping back to her face and the look with which she returned Peter's was wholly serene. How deep and exquisite that serenity was Peter, of course, could not guess, but her smile gave him confidence.

"I can assure you," he said to Jimmie and Beryl, "I never felt so much at home anywhere before. I envy you the chance of getting the first thrill of the Burnham hospitality."

"Now, now," chuckled Amos. "All right, Jimmie, go fetch your bags so's you can get started thrillin'. It's gettin' on for supper time and Mira don't like her food to stand."

For a moment or two after the chattering pair had departed, a slightly awkward silence pervaded the sitting room. Rhoda was first to break it.

"Gramp," she asked in a very small voice, "did you know all along?"

Amos grinned. "Pretty much," he said, "you see 'twas like this ——"

"And after that," he finished, "it was only a case o' puttin' two and two together."

"And we thought we were the cagey ones," said Peter. "I don't think, Rhoda, that intrigue is turning

Gallant Fraud

out to be our forte. Certainly it isn't mine. It was anything but clever for me to give you a name that wasn't mine. I don't excuse it, but I can explain it by saying I was under orders not to give away my identity. I still am for that matter."

"Let's tell Gramp the whole story, exactly as it happened," interrupted Rhoda, who now that her nightmare doubts were ended didn't want to be reminded of them. "It all started with that talk we had about Jimmie," she began and went steadily on to a finish.

"I kind o' thought that was about the gist of it," chuckled Amos. "What I couldn't figger was how you run acrost this particular lad. Well, no harm's been done, and considerable good has come out of it. I confess I've enjoyed the performance while 'twas goin' on. 'Course, I got sort of to thinkin' of Peter as my grandson. I won't say I don't hate to give him up, for all havin' the real Jimmie." He stopped and twinkled at Peter.

"How about keeping me on as a grandson-in-law, sir?" asked Peter. "Couldn't we manage it for him, darling?"

"I wouldn't wonder if we could," said Rhoda and went happily into the arms he held out for her.

Gallant Fraud

No one would ever know now, least of all Peter, she thought with a sigh of contentment, that once she had doubted this was where she and only she belonged.

Neither of them knew when Amos went out and closed the door softly behind him.

He stood leaning against it. Well, things certainly had turned out fine. He had all his grandchildren now. Jimmie looked like a good steady lad. He'd probably never set the river afire but that didn't matter as long as he behaved himself. Beryl was a cute trick all right. She'd keep him up to the mark. Urson? Well, he might have learned a lesson. He was out of the Simpson clutches and would have a better chance. Rhoda and Peter?

"Ah, Rhoda and Peter!" said Amos lingeringly.

Cousin Mira bustled down the back stairs. Her face was moist and pink from exertion. She had on her best print dress.

"My land, Amos Burnham," she panted, "I skursely know which end I stand on with all the hullabaloo!"

"Why Miry," said Amos, "I'm surprised at you. Don't you know celestial music when you hear it? That ain't any hullabaloo, it's the Mornin' Stars singin' 'Home Sweet Home' together!"

